

**LIGHT IN THE BLOOD**  
**and**  
**THE LANGUAGE OF FREEDOM: NARRATIVE FORM**  
**IN E. L. DOCTOROW**

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of  
PhD in Creative Writing  
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**Nicholas Paul Murgatroyd**

**School of Arts, Histories and Cultures**

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## Abstracts

*Light in the Blood* uses Ovid's *Metamorphoses* as a starting point for a novel that features change, imagination and horror, and which, like Ovid's original work, incorporates elements of several genres. Set in modern day Constanța in Romania, where Ovid was exiled by Augustus, it follows the experiences of five authors who are on retreat near the city and preparing for a debate on Ovid's legacy. A storm at the beginning of the novel releases mysterious energies, after which a giant cockroach begins to haunt one of the writers, two of the writers are brought together as lovers who unknowingly re-enact versions of Ovid's most famous love stories, and Ted Nowakow, the most famous of the authors, mutates into a wererhino.

In his transformed state, Ted suffers from fugues in which the more savage side of his nature takes control. The first murder he commits in this fugue state prompts the police to come to the retreat, but they seem powerless to prevent further murders and are unwilling to believe that there could be a monster loose in the forest surrounding the retreat. As the novel progresses, the remaining authors begin to fear that something is hunting them down, and it becomes a question of which one of them will survive.

Despite the novel's several fantastical elements, it is deliberately located within a realistic world because part of my interest lies in exploring the relationship between reality, language and imagination, in the framework of both the late postmodern era of hyperreality and celebrity culture and the legacy of the Cold War. Although the novel features writers as its central characters, through the use of Ovidian echoes and motifs I hope to move it away from a simple consideration of the fate of fiction/writing in the twenty-first century and towards a renewed awareness of the power of creativity and the imagination, and its close relation to terror.

*The Language of Freedom: Narrative Form in E. L. Doctorow* examines how Doctorow uses narrative form to subvert the discourse of what Raymond Williams terms 'the dominant culture'. Moving beyond both the categorisation of Doctorow as a Leftist writer and the critical focus on his treatment of history, I consider the way in which his work resists monological representations of reality and instead promotes fiction as a democratic arena in which the novelist remains free to present alternative readings to those of the dominant culture. An integral part of this study is an examination of Doctorow's potential intertextual relation to Herman Melville and the legacy of American Democratic Idealism.

My first chapter focuses on encyclopaedic narrative forms in *The Book of Daniel* and *City of God*. It includes a survey of the main theorists on encyclopaedic literature and a study of how Doctorow's novels fulfil the categories they identify, but attempts to move beyond some of their critical strictures to consider how Doctorow's use of this form destabilises claims to total knowledge on the part of the government and other institutions.

My second chapter considers Doctorow's use of genre fiction models in *Billy Bathgate* and *The Waterworks*. I argue that these two books represent a return to genre writing that was inspired by Doctorow's frustration with trying to write political fiction in the late Cold-War era. The chapter investigates the novels' submerged political content and examines how they can be read as critiques of the Reagan and Bush Sr administrations, as well as meditations on the nature of democracy in the United States and of the role of the political writer within it.

Throughout both chapters I make extensive use of E. L. Doctorow's newly available archive in order to offer insights into the thinking behind the novels.

## **Declaration**

No portion of the work referred to in this thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.

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## Acknowledgements

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# **LIGHT IN THE BLOOD**

*for Jemima*

*It is not down on any map; true places never are.*

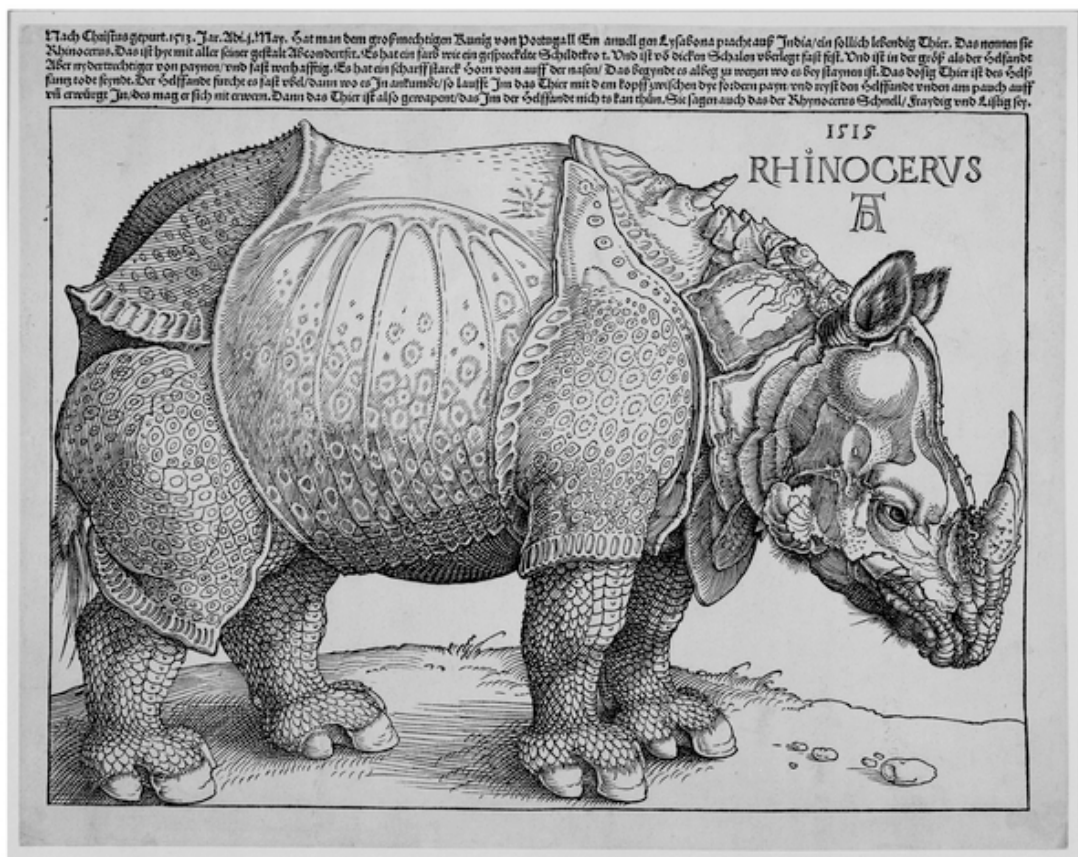
Herman Melville

*... imagination was itself a natural force, unmanageable.*

Don DeLillo

*The ill-starred rite | Led to a grimmer end.*

Ovid



Albrecht Dürer, *Rhinoceros*

## **0: State Hunting Lodge #1**

THE STORM CLOUDS were stories waiting to be told. All afternoon they gathered on the horizon, their purple and gunmetal grey billows veined with inky scrawls. The air grew heavy, a presence on the skin.

As the first distant thunder grumbled across the treetops, four figures emerged from the five chalets of chipped, water-stained concrete that sat in the centre of the forest. Unconsciously mimicking each other, they stood and blinked into the bruised, dirty yellow air, like dazed survivors emerging to find that this place was all that was left, the centre of whatever world now remained.

Nudged by the skittish wind, they drifted towards the canteen with the listless steps of people who already know not to expect much. Not so many years before, their steps would have been eager. Then, the chefs would have been Romania's finest and they would have been communist leaders shepherding wives or mistresses across a strictly regulated lawn. But the chefs today were locals who made no attempt to conceal their contempt for the ingredients, nor their deep suspicion of the minor foreign celebrities – novelists they'd never heard of – that the Ovid Foundation had enticed here with an idyllic description of a rural retreat that felt closer to fiction with each day that passed.

For although State Hunting Lodge #1 had once been the secret jewel in the communist crown, it was now locked in a process of accelerated decline. Long grass tugged at the ankles as the writers walked to dinner. The trees surrounding the retreat drew closer every day. The thin, dusty track that snaked through the forest was now a fragile cord, the retreat's only connection to the exterior that was already forgetting this huddle of low buildings.

It was difficult to believe that the communist leaders who'd once had the power to create this hunting forest had ever existed. They'd had the power to import animals from all over Romania, the power to create a forest with trees uprooted from estates that had themselves been requisitioned, the power to first transform the landscape then force cartographers to represent it as a blank on the map. Now they had none. Swallowed by history, they were villains almost as mythical as the nymphs, fauns, harpies and goddesses whose statues punctuated the grounds; within a generation they'd be no more real than the chipped and chlorine-bleached scenes from Ovid that decorated the floor of the enormous swimming pool at the centre of the retreat.

Surrounded by vertiginous slopes, the pool was the retreat's amphitheatre heart. In the first days after their arrival the writers had challenged each other to identify the images that shifted beneath the water, crude hybrids of classicism and socialist realism. Jason, a visitor here when Constanța was still known as Tomis, held aloft a golden fleece that looked like a drag queen's wig. Orpheus' harp could, in this pool bottom version, have been the mangled radiator from a Trabant or Laštun, so it was impossible to know whether Eurydice's quiet smile stemmed from Orpheus' music or some secret knowledge that he would soon turn around and save her from listening to it forever. A crack in the tiles gave the Minotaur a third horn in the middle of his head. Europa and Leda smiled broadly at the heavy touch of their rapist. Actaeon crouched and watched Diana as she bathed in a pool within the pool, attended by various nymphs whose nakedness was rendered in loving detail, while, at the deep end, Hero looked on impassively as Leander sank beneath the white peaks of the waves.

Some images remained unidentified. The game and the light-hearted camaraderie of those first afternoons had run their course before their identity

could be established; the promised friendships had never progressed to the point where the writers felt comfortable enough with each other to admit to any gaps in their knowledge of Ovid. And now the public debate that had always been the payoff demanded for their stay here was imminent, they had more pressing concerns.

On paper, their task was simple: a debate about Ovid's legacy today in which they'd each contribute around ten minutes of waffle before questions from the floor and a half-hour signing books. In practice, it looked far more complex. Rumours circulated that tickets weren't selling, that it had been a mistake to insist on a conference in Constanța instead of Bucharest or one of the university towns, that a group of Romanian novelists had organised a boycott in protest at their own absence from the stage.

The provenance of the rumours remained unclear, but everybody knew instinctively they were right. It was no secret Ovid had detested life here, exiled to this strange outpost of the empire that sat uneasily between civilisation and savagery and where people had no time for poets. Things barely seemed to have improved since. Today's Russian tourists were too busy consolidating their recent metamorphosis into the mega-rich to sit in some faded lecture hall and listen to authorial platitudes and the careful sycophancy of the local host. There was a real danger the audience would consist only of experts intent on making the writers pay for the half-remembered myths they'd borrowed for their novels.

With the debate due to take place in three days, they'd each tried to write something, and they'd each failed. Pens refused to move across the page. Fingers failed to press keys. The surge of energy they'd each felt when they received the invitations had morphed into weary resignation. The debate would be as much of a disappointment as the ramshackle retreat. Any words they had to offer would

probably float away, the indifference of the audience the final corrective to the myth of success they'd each privately nurtured. For if the four weeks here had taught them anything, it was their insignificance. They mattered so little the staff couldn't be bothered to open the canteen door and let them in from the steadily gathering rain.

So they waited in uneasy silence for the door to open, exchanging glances long since stripped of the pretence of friendship or trust. They looked at each other with the bitter self-knowledge that nobody here was more important than the others. They were all stereotypes, writers whose presence served to satisfy the organisers' need for a particular demographic. Had any of them refused the invitation, a phonecall would have been made to the next name on the list: the next feminist, the next sixties radical, the next mixed-race author, the next crime writer.

The only truly irreplaceable writer among them was T. E. 'Ted' Nowakow. As if to underline his difference from the others, he emerged now bone-dry from the office next to the canteen, smiling and chatting with Luca, the retreat coordinator. Keys glinted at Luca's belt but he made no move to open the door and give them all shelter. Instead, he fumbled open an umbrella and, standing on tiptoes and stretching his arm as far as he could, held it tremblingly over Ted's head to prevent any rain damage to this prized beast.

This surprised no one. That someone as famous as Ted should be here was a mystery in itself, but if the staff couldn't believe their luck, they never lost a chance to show their gratitude. Since the first day they'd deferred to Ted as though he alone, with all his weight of celebrity and success, would make or break the debate. His wineglass was always filled first and never left empty. His chalet had the shortest walk to the canteen and the largest veranda. His name dwarfed everyone else's on all the publicity materials and nobody dared complain.

For while the others still aspired in varying degrees to global fame, Ted had long accepted it as his natural habitat. He'd published a book every two years since 1973 and won a prize with every single one of them. Under communism, samizdat photocopies of his books had been the contraband treasure of every student dorm. Approaching sixty, he still strutted around like a freshman quarterback. His wife was eighteen years younger than him and his children were barely teenagers. Would-be writers mortgaged their futures to attend his college writing classes. He recited whole paragraphs of his trademark short sentences over dinner each day, but never asked the others how their work was progressing. He was everything they hated about America and everything they secretly wanted to be. And perhaps never more so than at this moment as a taxi rumbled through the gate and eased to a stop before him, ready to bear him away for the evening.

Aware of the tasteless food that awaited them inside, the damp writers watched enviously as Luca opened the door and Ted stooped to get inside without once acknowledging the group of his so-called colleagues.

—Not joining us tonight then, Ted? Anne called. She wasn't interested in the answer. She only wanted a reply, some sign that this obnoxious creature remembered they still existed.

—What? Ted said.

—She said are you not stopping for dinner, Patrick said.

—You know I'd love to, Paddy, but I got things to do. I need to make some calls on my cellphone, he said, before adding, like a lie he'd just conceived: It's my son's birthday.

—So you don't want any company?

—Not tonight, Marc buddy. I wouldn't want to bore you with me on the phone.

—As opposed to doing it when you speak to us, Clarissa muttered under her breath.

—What was that, Clarrie? You need to go into town for something? I could help you out if it's urgent.

Clarissa's cheeks burnt. She could feel his eyes steadily trained on her breasts, as they were every afternoon when, almost magically, he needed to stretch his legs on the veranda while she showered at the poolside. Everybody turned to her. She knew they were waiting for her to damn herself and slide in beside him, confirm their suspicions she'd been doing it all along. Perhaps they already anticipated the pleasure of seeing her mutated in a couple of years' time into the latest adoring female whose love cursed whatever cipher Ted invented for himself in his next opus on adultery and the American male.

—No thanks, Ted. Seriously, I'm fine.

—Some other time, then. He moved to close the door, then paused and said with a smirk: —Anne, I take it you're okay. I don't want to make you stay up past your bedtime.

Ted slammed the door shut before she could reply. Still laughing to himself at his joke, he leaned forwards and told the driver to move on.

Nobody knew this was the last time they'd see Ted in this form, so nobody stood and watched the car pull away. They turned instead to watch Luca fumble the key into the lock like an incompetent jailer ushering them into a prison.

Though Ted was already speeding into Constanța by the time their first course arrived – a grainy, lurid pink mass whose fishy stink suggested it had once been carp roe – his absence freed nobody.

Anne had entered the canteen quietly anticipating the chance to eat without



having to pay unwitting court to him, but the writers sat without talking, as though Ted's bull-necked ghost lurked at the head of the table, willing them into silent submission. Knowing how much Ted would have loved to see them like this only heightened her disappointment. Their hangdog faces would confirm his obvious belief that this retreat was an extension of his college class. Because for Ted, everyone else was here only to receive lessons from The Master, a captive audience for his constant anecdotes about golfing with Bech, roughing it with Zuckerman or getting stoned with Tripp.

But the biggest disappointment for Anne was that no matter how much she resented Ted's oppressive dominance of proceedings, she couldn't bring herself to do anything about it. She'd spent most of the past four decades dealing with boors who thought women existed only for their titillation and defended herself against everyone from professors to landlords, bank managers to sons-in-law, yet something stopped her from challenging Ted. She didn't want to give him the satisfaction of thinking she somehow envied his prestige. But most of all, she didn't want to see that look on his face that she saw everywhere these days – the quiet surprise that she was still there, as if old age had made her invisible.

She knew she was visible to her daughter, but being chief babysitter to her grandchildren wasn't enough. She wanted to be seen by everyone. That was probably why the closer they got to the dreaded debate, the more Anne found herself perversely looking forward to the ten minutes when she'd be the undisputed centre of attention beneath the lights. It would be like the old days, when readers had crammed into bookshops, civic arts theatres and university lecture halls to hear her read. She knew there'd be fewer faces in Constanța, but she'd speak knowing that people could *see* her. She'd exist effortlessly before their gaze, without worrying that she was somehow disappearing. Because too often, when standing at

counters or sitting in restaurants, she sensed the effort staff had to make simply to notice she was there. The doctor's receptionist squinted at her longer each time she visited, as if it were a struggle to bring her into focus. Twice joggers in the park had blindly run into her. Things had got so bad that she couldn't walk towards an automatic door without suffering a minor panic attack over whether the sensor would perceive her existence. So how could she take on Ted in an argument if he too struggled to see her, and when he had limitless energy and she had none?

His parting jibe about her bedtime had been cruelly precise. Drowsiness had dogged her since she'd arrived here. The minute she'd sat down to dinner this evening, fatigue had seeped upwards like a horribly familiar sludge. Most nights she walked back to her chalet as if across flypaper, her shins aching with the effort of pulling her feet clear of the ground, and collapsed into bed for sleep that never left her refreshed.

She'd felt like this once before, when doctors had taken three months to diagnose a thyroid problem. In her renewed dread that the half-glimpsed ghosts and the sensation of her life ebbing out through her fingertips that had plagued her then would return, the daily routine of her medication had grown increasingly serious. She scrutinised each tablet for signs of malformation, then swallowed it with a silent prayer; they were no longer tablets, but part of a mystical rite that would shield her from whatever terrible things lurked in her imagination.

—Are you okay, Anne?

Clarissa was smiling at her in a way that made Anne think she might have asked the question several times already. A hot flush of shame rashed Anne's neck. She was used to being a mother, not being mothered.

—Yes, yes, I'm fine, she said, trying to make swift, reassuring eye contact with the faces regarding her from above half-emptied plates. Just feeling a little

sleepy with the heat.

—It's been awful, hasn't it? Marc said. I've hardly written anything all afternoon. I tried reading some Ovid instead but even that was a struggle.

If Marc had hoped to elicit agreement from the others, he was disappointed. Clarissa bowed her head towards her plate as she always did whenever writing was mentioned, a tacit acknowledgement she too shared Anne's bemusement as to why the organisers had invited a crime writer, however pretty. And Patrick. Well, Patrick was no longer the writer she'd encountered sporadically in the eighties and nineties. It wasn't just the alcoholic's nose with its intricate marbling of red veins. His personality had deteriorated too. What had once been a gruff charm had transformed into something more terrible, less forgiving. Whether it was his wife's death the previous year or something else, she didn't know, but there was something beastly about him. On the first night here he'd made a point of asking Marc how his surname was Kahn when he was white. It might have been Anne's imagination, but when Marc had explained she was sure Patrick had repeated the phrase *mixed-race* with the sneer of someone affronted he could no longer say half-caste. Admittedly, there'd been no hint of racism since then, but he never spoke to Marc without somehow making his words feel like an attack.

—Perhaps you'd find it easier if you spent less time running and swimming and more time at your desk, Patrick said.

—Well, I've only been for a—

—The only stamina you need to worry about is sitting at the desk all day every day. You sit there and you write. And if you're not writing, you're thinking about writing. If you're not doing that, you're a poseur. One of those imbeciles who think writing's all about book signings and looking pretty in your author photo. If you're going to write anything worthwhile, you've got to forget that crap.

—But I—

—You’ve got to forget everything apart from the words. The only exercise I ever did was walking down the shops for more fags.

—But didn’t you say you’d stopped smoking last year? Anne said.

—Yes.

—So now you just write all the time? You never have a day off or fiddle on the internet. You never go to a gallery. You never go on holiday. I’m surprised you’re even eating. How does your publisher ever manage to keep up with you?

Patrick glared across the table at her. Part of her couldn’t blame him. She’d be annoyed too. What had started out as a well-meaning attempt to protect Marc from Patrick’s self-serving rant had quickly become too impassioned, too sarcastic. That was the problem with the constant exhaustion. She’d lost all sense of nuance. Jokes became tirades. Observations became snide remarks. Minor complaints threatened to shift into tearful lamentations. Reality shifted into something else.

—All I was saying – and I’m sure that with all your books behind you, Anne, you’d probably agree – is that you’ve got to stay dedicated. There might be days when you don’t feel like writing another word, but you’ve got to get through them. Sod everything else. It’s about sacrifice. It’s about sticking at it. It’s about ignoring the bottle of wine because you can get another few hundred words out after dinner.

Laughter bubbled up to Anne’s lips, but fortunately the waitress – scrawny but attractive, like a witch in a children’s book – chose that moment to arrive and clear away the dishes before it could escape. Patrick scowled down at the table. If he felt another few hundred words were in the offing tonight, he did nothing to prevent the doltish waiter refilling his wine glass to the brim.

Exhausted, Anne asked for water. She regretted it the moment the waitress set the main course before her. The food had been poor since the beginning, but in

Ted's absence it had reached a fresh nadir. A vaguely defined island of grey flesh sat surrounded by a sea of cabbage boiled to translucence. A faint smell of filled nappies wafted up to her as she scowled at the plate. She wanted to cry: from the frustrated expectations of eating; from her failure to order wine to mask the taste; from the renewed knowledge there were four more days of this to endure. The four weeks here were four weeks of her life that were forever lost, too hefty a wager for only the chance of ten minutes of attention. She wished she could fall asleep now and wake up back in England, away from the other writers and the dreadful food.

Marc eagerly sawed into the meat and lifted a greasy, shredded lump to his mouth. Anne knew she could never do the same: she'd rather eat one of the stuffed animal heads that lined the walls of the canteen, trophies of hunts that had probably never taken place.

—I'm sorry, I think the heat's got to me, she said. I'm going to bed.

Clarissa was the only one who made the slightest show of concern. Anne brushed her questions aside and headed towards the door, away from the triumphant gleam in Patrick's eye. Four more days, she told herself. Four more days and she'd never have to deal with his or Ted's monstrous egos again.

The wind made the door fly open with more force than she'd intended, but a chorus of voices calling her name delayed her exit. She turned to see faces shrouded in gloom.

—Anne! Marc moaned, his mouth still half full of meat. Turn the light back on, please.

In the grainy light filtering in through the open door, she found the old-fashioned metal light switch and flicked it upwards. The room remained in darkness. She looked out over the silent retreat and noticed that none of the lights over the verandas were on either.

—Not guilty I'm afraid. It looks like a power cut, she said.

The smile that played across her lips found no mirror in any of the worried faces turned towards her. For Anne, the night was as good as over. For them, there was only the long wait for something to happen, for light to return and relieve the encroaching darkness. She was too tired to care.

—Goodnight, she said, silhouetted by the lightning that flashed across the sky behind her. I do hope no one's afraid of the dark.

## **1: The storm of creation**

THE STORM TRANSFORMED the world long before it reached the retreat. Sea and sky and earth threatened to become one.

The chaotic sea churned frothing crests of scum from the waves. What had lain dormant for centuries slowly stirred into life. Skeletal fingers reached for the surface. The timbers of long-sunk ships creaked and groaned in preparation for one final voyage. Spray hissed into the air. Waves smashed themselves in white foaming anger against the harbour wall. Money counted for nothing: loose change pinged like bullets into the side of cargo ships that keeled and listed drunkenly; containers of luxury goods strained against chains that – stretched to breaking point – sang in the wind of imminent freedom; lightning crackled down the masts of the nouveau riche yachts that bowed and bobbed in feverish obsequy, desperate to appease this awful power.

Inky clouds swept overhead. An endless bank of mutation, they hid the city from the heavens and delivered it to the night. The gale tossed and threw birds like leaves. To their terrified eyes, Constanța literally shrank as power cuts plunged whole areas into darkness and returned the flickering outlines of the city to what had once, long ago, been Tomis.

As the sky fizzed with lightning, people sprinted for cover from the rain that pounded down in rods. Groups of strangers huddled silently together in uncomfortable intimacy beneath the awnings of closed shops. Some stared forlornly at distant, shuttered bars and the melted reflections of their neon signs that puddled on the pavement. Others watched the rainwater torrent towards saturated drains. Most stared at the clouds, waiting for the reappearance of stars

long buried in blind darkness.

The storm tore at walls and roofs. It set shutters rattling and slamming and made curtains billow and bloom like jellyfish before windows whose every crack, fault, flaw was an invitation to enter. It danced through the deserted squares, weaved through empty arcades, rasped across Roman ruins, charged down the soulless streets of the sprawling modern quarter and burst into the forest.

Here the flashing sky strobed the wind-blasted trees into life. With their branches twisted together, they rustled and swayed, plunged and swung, dancers moving to a private music. Fallen leaves skipped, scurried and chased one another into patterns that remained unperceived, but were no less real: one moment a camel, the next a whale, then a pack of wolves growling across the forest floor, dipping and swerving among the ebony trunks.

Like a conscripting army that whipped up the earth into its service, the leaves were soon joined by dust, by insects, by twigs, by cans, passport photos, worms, sun-bleached maps and sweet wrappers, by cigarette ends, plastic bottles, spiders, pregnancy tests and blister packs, by banana skins and apple cores, pencils, a sock, slugs and snails, bank cards, magazine pages, plastic bags, unpaid bills, syringes and smouldered matchboxes.

A ravaging, living, breathing arrow of detritus, it sped unerringly towards where the writers' low chalets huddled together in the night. It never found its mark. A wire fence buckled before its mass then sprang back, a net around its quarry. Things were contained.

The storm eased for a moment, as though considering its response to this sudden ambush of its forces. In the calm, a bewildered, dizzied and exhausted toad that had been dragged along picked its way over the mountain of trapped matter. A sublime vista revealed itself at the summit: the retreat's swimming pool rippled



with a phosphorescent allure. Only a few inches of wire blocked the toad's path. Summoning its remaining energy, it battled back against the breeze, tensed its hind legs and leapt into the air.

The toad cleared the fence with ease, but its joy swiftly transformed to terror as the wind hurled it across space. With its damp skin silvered by lightning, it shot over the swimming pool like a nighttime Phaeton. It flailed its limbs against the air. Its jowls shook with the unnatural velocity, as if it were constantly oscillating between itself and a doppelganger whose body perpetually remained a couple of millimetres ahead, testing the air. But the night held a truer double. As gravity reasserted its claim and drew the flying toad into the arc of its final descent, a phantom shape raced through the air to meet the toad: its own reflection in a chalet window. Arms reached out to seize the terrified animal, perfectly mirroring its hapless attempts to swim through the storm until, with eyes bulging with narcissistic horror, the reflection and the actual slammed together in the glass.

The impact jerked Patrick Rayner upright in his seat. The sentence he'd been trying to write moments earlier vanished from his mind. Words no longer seemed pressing compared to the puzzle of what had caused the loud splat. He twisted around. In the dark mirror of the window, the toad sliding down and bubbling its lifeblood out onto the glass remained invisible. There was only the reflected square of light from his laptop screen, cut through by the silhouette of his body. He shouted an exploratory hello. No voice answered. Only a high-pitched squeak, like chalk scraped across a blackboard.

Patrick told himself the noise was one of the others' idea of a joke, an idle act of vengeance for something he'd said at dinner. They'd spook him and then laughingly invite themselves in for a raid on his dwindling stash of booze. He stared at the window and tried to manufacture a suitable rage, but the longer he

stared at the rectangle of darkness, the harder it was to prevent his mind discovering other explanations. It traced an uneasy path to ghosts and ghouls, and, with Transylvania no more than the beat of a bat's wing away, vampires.

—Hello? he asked again.

The squeaking noise stopped as abruptly as it had started but Patrick's anxiety lingered. He rose from the desk and shuffled across the room. Resting his hands on the chill glass, he stood and stared into the bustling night. Hairs rose uncomfortably on the back of his neck. His breath sounded loud in his ears. And still the image of the room floated in the glass, like a mask that hid the night's true face. He brought his face close enough to the window for his spectacle frames to click against the glass, cupped his hands around his eyes to block out the dim light and peered out into the darkness.

Nothing. The power cut and the storm clouds above had reduced visibility to virtually zero. The one discernible movement was the treeline amorphously shifting and reshaping in the gale, a deeper darkness against the night.

Patrick moved his head back and watched his breath mist on the glass. He told himself there was no need to venture outside to investigate. The noise had been nothing sinister. Not a vampire but a bird blown off course to be discovered the next day in a bloody mass of feathers and bones. Only a moron would be out in weather like this. Marc perhaps. Off on one of the runs he seemed to believe would compensate for all the cigarettes he smoked, oblivious to the memories and guilt the smell stirred for others. It would serve Marc right to be stumbling through the velvety darkness, all direction lost. His posy climate-control running shirt wouldn't offer much protection then. Out there he could trip and stretch his arms out for something to break his fall but struggle to know if he was touching animal, mineral or vegetable. Only lightning would reveal true forms, a camera flash to show

nature at its sharpest, red in tooth and claw.

Patrick grinned. Ghosts and vampires drifted towards the edges of consciousness, where they lingered like gatecrashers whose presence he could bear, if not ignore entirely. There was nothing out there to see. All in his head after all.

He stepped away from the window, but it was too soon to return to his computer. His breathing still felt too hurried. He needed to be completely calm before he wrote any more, otherwise it would be even worse than the stuff he'd been hacking out since dinner. He was working on a novel about Goya, the first of a projected trilogy on artists who, like himself, had suffered the world's awful retreat into silence. The books would be studies of deafness, of age, of artistic struggle. First Goya, then Beethoven, then Buñuel; distorted images of himself.

When the idea had first come to him he'd half-hoped the books would more or less write themselves. Already Goya was proving how misguided he'd been. The Goya he'd planned to portray was the aged genius who retreated to the Quinta del Sordo and produced the black paintings, a dark mirror of the world that had all but forgotten him. But a different Goya was stubbornly calling for his attentions: the middle-aged artist hunched over a worktable, scoring plates with wild etchings of witches flying through the air, of farting babies used as bellows and of the sleep of reason surrounded by monsters. The artist who saw idiocy all around him but was unable to absent himself from society. The artist who'd found relative fame but still needed to work for money. A distorted image, something to remember him by.

Patrick stared at his ghostly reflection in the window. It was nothing more than a silhouette, the space he'd leave in the world after his death. He turned from it just in time to see his laptop begin to shut itself down.

A shin-cracking collision with the coffee table interrupted his despairing dash towards the desk. He landed heavily on the tiled floor. Breath humphed out of him,

robbed him of the air with which to curse his luck. One hand grasped the offended limb. The other strained to catch the bottle of duty-free malt that rocked across the displaced table and tottered precariously on the edge, glinting softly in the last of the laptop's blue light. Then the hard drive expired with a high-pitched whine and plunged the chalet into the same darkness as lay outside.

The night was closing in on him. Merciless.

Or not quite.

Somehow, in the pitch black, his clutching fingers managed to close around the bottle, catching it as it tipped into space. He rolled onto his back and hugged it to his chest like a baby.

With the bottle safe, Patrick finally allowed himself a low moan of suffering that was only partially exaggerated. The pain in his throbbing shin was so acute he could already picture himself hobbling to breakfast, already see the other writers' eyes glint with unconcealed Schadenfreude.

He glugged a mouthful of malt from the bottle and scowled into the darkness. While the others would still be working, their daily output safe and backed up, he'd probably just lost five hundred words. There'd been a time when their loss would have pained him more than any physical injury, the words irreplaceable, jewels that had somehow vanished into the air. But that was before Rachel had died of cancer and he'd looked through all the books he'd written and found no comfort, only words. Now the thing he regretted most was the lost time: his touch-typing fingers had convulsed in the aquarium light of the laptop screen for nothing. It was work for which he'd never get paid. He may as well have spent the night drinking.

Patrick let his head sink to the cool, tiled floor and took another swig of the whisky. He tried to cheer himself with the knowledge he only had four days left to endure in this awful place. His daughter had convinced him to come, but after more

than three weeks here it was a struggle to summon the paternal indulgence required to forgive her. When Chloe came to collect him at the airport, it would be all he could do not to disown her then and there in the arrivals lounge.

Yes, it had been a free trip to Europe.

Yes, it had forced a change of his routine and got him out of the house.

Yes, it had been a chance to spend time with other writers.

But what terrible mutant sickness did he have that any of those things could represent a cure? And why had they invited him in the first place? The invitation cited a career rich and inventive in its use of Ovidian mythology, but Patrick knew that any connections were accidental at best, imaginary. Some stories were so basic they lay in everything, like timbers beneath brickwork. If you looked hard enough, you could find parallels wherever you wanted. But was a poet in love always Orpheus or a raped woman Lavinia? Was every tyrannical father Saturn and every smooth seducer Jove?

Patrick hadn't looked at Ovid since grammar school, had all but forgotten him. The complimentary copy of *Metamorphoses* remained untouched on his bedside table, like a Gideon's Bible in a seedy hotel. He had nothing to offer at the debate. He planned to switch his hearing aid off as soon as they arrived at the conference hall and claim it was broken. Nobody could argue with the deaf. He'd sit on the stage in silence and watch the others squirm and mouth empty platitudes about sex and power, violence and monsters, language and identity. If the retreat had failed to live up to its billing, he was sure the ringside seat for their suffering would at least ensure a fond, final memory.

Whether it was this prospect of his own Schadenfreude or the preliminary effects of the malt on top of the carafe of wine he'd drunk with dinner, Patrick began to feel reassuringly mellow. He reached up to the sofa and dragged a cushion

down to place below his head. There was no rush to go anywhere. A simple flick of a switch on his hearing aid muffled the violent clatter of hailstones on the roof. He lay and stared into the darkness and let the whisky pulse drowsily into his veins. The pain in his shin steadily ebbed away. Each swig of whisky took him further into the tender caress of soft hands that rose invisibly from the tiles to cradle him as he sank towards sleep.

A sixfold scuttling of insect feet across the tiles shattered his reverie. His skin prickled in anticipation of something crawling over him. He'd seen cockroaches here so big you could hollow out the shells and serve nibbles in them. And they'd eat anything: he knew it wasn't the cleaning girl who'd spirited his toenail clippings away from beneath the bed. Earlier in the day, he'd turned from his desk to see a cockroach the size of a saucer loitering in the middle of the room. It was more than the size of the thing that had unnerved him. There was the creepy sense that it was somehow studying him, feeling towards him with its reedy antennae. It hadn't moved until he stood and roared at it, chased it from the chalet like a stray dog.

The back of Patrick's head clipped the corner of the coffee table when he jerked himself up from the floor, but neither the pain nor the resurgent throb in his shin were enough to distract him. He rose stiff-limbed and lunged as wildly as he could manage towards the source of the scuttling. No satisfying squelch answered his heavy stamp. Only silence. He reached for his hearing aid. The incriminating patter returned before his fingers found the switch. The insect invader was somewhere near his desk, trespassing on his territory.

In the darkness, Patrick carefully negotiated his way across the remembered topography of the room, guiding his tiptoe steps by the insect's arrhythmic tap-tap-taptap-tap. He hoped to hear it shuffle away at his approach but the tapping

continued. It was as if the insect were staying still, deliberately taunting him with an insect jig. For a moment, he drunkenly pictured a cockroach engaged in a gravity-defying Cossack dance. Then a flash of lightning revealed something far stranger:

Its limbs jerking in the light, a cockroach larger than anything he'd ever seen or imagined sat at his desk. It was the size of a small child. It was at his laptop. And it was typing.

Darkness returned. The looming apparition disappeared as swiftly as it had burned itself onto his consciousness, but the drumming of laptop keys continued.

Fear thickened his blood. Patrick willed his eyes to penetrate the darkness. Trained from birth to distinguish between gradations, subtleties of light and shadow, they struggled with something so absolute. This was pitch black, a solid wall of onyx that melted into air at the touch of a hand. Such extremes belonged only in dreams, but whatever was happening now insisted on its reality. Though his brain felt strangely fuzzy, his every thought struggling through a veil of gauze, the ache in his shins was too real and immediate to be part of any dream. And while the darkness had rendered his sight redundant, his other senses seemed unusually acute. The smell of charred shit stung his nostrils, tainting the smoky heather taste the malt had left. And his deafness failed to shield him from the sharply audible tapping from the desk.

Patrick took a swig of malt. He reminded himself this wouldn't be the first time nightmares had stolen forth into waking moments. Reality was flimsy. He'd sensed things pushing in from without since he was a child, and travel had always intensified the notion that there were things we secretly knew but never acknowledged. When a virulent amoeba had struck him down in Mexico, he'd lain in a dingy hotel room for two days and calmly conversed with relatives long-dead,

while the biggest surprise on recovering from a spider bite in Australia a few years previously was to find that Rachel was still alive and that there was neither a still warm gun in his suitcase nor police threatening to break down the door.

So he knew the spectre of the cockroach could have been a hallucination, the result of any number of things. He'd felt unsettled as soon as he'd arrived in Romania and tugged his suitcase through an airport that was both recognisably his world and inherently alien. Travel did that to him, the way each journey required you to take a new reality on trust.

But it wasn't just the travel. There were all kinds of reasons waiting. Something had made a switch in his head flick the wrong way: an unperceived bang to the head when he fell; the uneasy mingling of the malt with the rough wine that was the sole means of making dinner vaguely palatable; the monastically solid mattress that had kept him awake night after night. But no reason he could think of gave him the courage necessary to reach out into the darkness and let his fingertips brush through the air. Each time he raised his hand, he let it fall back to his side. He knew what he'd seen, knew what he heard.

Things could happen without the permission of our understanding. Fear lay between the event and its explanation, in the words the cockroach typed into the all-consuming blackness. Goya said the sleep of reason creates monsters, but Patrick was convinced he hadn't been asleep when he saw the cockroach. And he'd never felt more awake than now as he picked his way to the door. His earlier thought of Marc being torn apart by some beast no longer amused him as he touched the chill metal door handle. How could he be sure nothing worse than the cockroach lurked outside, waiting for him to answer its squeaking call from the window?

He glanced back towards the darkness by the desk and weighed the almost



empty bottle in his hand. The typing stopped.

In the sudden quiet, Patrick waited. He rubbed the back of his head, still sore from hitting the coffee table, and nursed the thought that it had been a hallucination after all. When he reached into his shirt pocket and switched his hearing aid back on, the shrieking and howling of the storm was as welcome as silence. The only rattle came from the hail on the roof.

He let go of the door handle. The bottle in his hand became a bottle once more, no longer a potential club against beasts that lurked outside. He took what would prove his final swig of the evening and let out a celebratory burp into the room.

The rattle of keys answered. Then stopped. Started again for a staccato burst, then stopped once more. Yet Patrick's fear didn't return with it. The more he listened, the more he found there was something oddly companionable about the rhythm. He recognised it as the familiar game of cat and mouse, hunting the sentence down. A particularly strident hitting of what could only be a full stop ended another burst and plunged the room into a longer silence that dulled all else. Patrick recognised it as the intimate calm that followed a good sentence. It was the calm of the zone. The calm that made the roach a kindred spirit, one more thing crawling around in the blackness, feeling its way towards the answers.

Languorous and seductive, the calm lulled Patrick into a dazed sense of security so overwhelming he didn't immediately register the unearthly light that began to emanate from the laptop screen. Biliious green, it grew in intensity with each fresh burst of words. It silhouetted the limbs of the cockroach: long and thin with regularly spaced lateral bristles, they looked like wire brushes or something for picking locks. As Patrick watched, the cockroach itself began to glow with the same light. The jagged luminescent letters that had colonised the screen steadily

crawled across the oily shell of the roach's back and flowed down towards its abdomen. The body and the text were one. The thing was alive with words.

Mesmerised, Patrick moved forwards, desperate to read what the cockroach was writing. He was close enough now for the ghosts of the glowing words to play across his shirt as if they searched for embodiment there too. He could have looked down and read them but he wanted to peer at the screen, read this story from the beginning. He leaned forwards and stretched out a tentative hand to lean on the desk.

The roach span round in the chair and hissed. A flash of lightning illuminated the stringy slime caught in its mandibles and glossed its eyes with fury.

Patrick's calm melted into confusion. Off-balance and overcome by terror, he staggered backwards. His choice was made. He turned and headed for the door and the fulminant air beyond, but a terrible voice that carried the rancour of centuries made him look back,

—Don't. Read. My work.

and not where he was going. Once again, his shin struck the coffee table and sent him sprawling helplessly. This time his forehead broke his fall. For a brief moment, the tiled floor filled his blurred vision. Then darkness swept over him and claimed him for its own.

## 2: The figure in the darkness

AS THOUGH SUMMONED by Patrick's vindictive imagination of moments before, Marc Khan groped blindly until his fingers closed around the bottle of țuică, the local firewater, and tumbled out of his chalet and into the tempest. Rain immediately lashed his face. Wind tugged at his limbs as he forced his way down the steps from the veranda. An inner voice told him to turn back now but he pressed on into the deeper darkness regardless. It was only weather. There'd be plenty of other nights when he could sit warm and dry while a storm raged outside; there were only three more when he'd have the chance to pop out and see Patrick Rayner or T. E. Nowakow.

Marc had no idea whether Ted had returned from town yet, but either of the two writers would do. The storm seemed the perfect opportunity to corner one of them. With the lights still out of action, he knew they'd be desperate enough for a drink to let him in. And then he'd get to work. He wasn't after convivial chat by candlelight. He wanted what he'd been hoping for since arrival but had never had the courage or the guile to request: the promise of a laudatory quote for his novel. If he left here without it, the whole trip would have been a failure.

He'd spent the last hour sitting in the darkness, convincing himself that the novel was ready, the time for tinkering over. But as he struggled forwards against the storm, familiar doubts resurfaced. A premonition of returning to London empty-handed sank leadenly through his gut. He saw himself in the hallway of his home, a room in an abandoned hospital where he paid minimal rent to share with recent graduates and long-term dreamers. They weren't tenants but so-called guardians, protecting the building from squatters until the owners found someone

willing to match their asking price. He'd stand on the filthy carpet with his shoulders aching from the heavy rucksack, desperate for a shower but unable to face the macramé of knotted hairs in the plughole. He'd crouch down and pick up the untidy stack of review copies and bills and junk mail damp to the touch, then he'd open the door onto the high-ceilinged room whose constant, chilly draughts never alleviated the stink of fried food and dankness that was so strong it infused the fabric of every item of clothing he owned, even here. He'd look around and see the familiar contours of the desk and the bed and the improvised wardrobe. And he'd know he was no closer to the moment when he'd no longer call it home.

The same premonition had plagued him for the last fortnight. It was why Marc had never joined the others in their increasingly scathing comments about the conditions here. They could say what they liked about the place, but for Marc the retreat offered a tantalising glimpse of the writing life that neither his paltry income from reviews for the freesheets nor the small, resolutely unearned advances for his two novels – *The Surreal I* and *Transformation State* – had managed to deliver. The food ranged from tasteless to bad, but it was free. He didn't have to stalk supermarket workers as they placed reduction stickers on vegetables or cheese. There was no internet or mobile phone to distract him, no rent to worry about or freelance deadlines to juggle. There was writing and nothing else. It was a long-delayed chance to become the person he'd always believed himself to be.

The one downside was the hostility from Rayner and Nowakow. Conversations either stopped when he approached or the tone shifted to one that advertised that their words had ceased to have any meaning. They ignored all his questions about work in progress. Whenever dinner table chat switched to writing, they met his contributions with grim disapproval, their eyes flickering warily over his blushing face.

He didn't want to think either of them was racist. Race was the easy excuse his dad had always fallen back on, the trump card in any dispute, whether with his Anglo-in-laws or the Indian relations he was sure looked down on him for his pale-faced children. He didn't want to be his dad. He wanted to believe that Ted and Patrick were better than that.

They'd been heroes since his teens. He still looked forward to anything new they wrote, even if, increasingly these days, it was only for a flash of the old brilliance. But there was no doubt they were getting personal. Ted couldn't have made it clearer how little he wanted his company in town. And then Patrick had followed tonight's lecture on the merits of non-exercise with the pronouncement that reviews were produced for people too stupid to think by writers too lazy to work. As if there were a choice. Marc would have loved never to write another review. He'd give anything to have a fraction of Ted's readership. He'd even settle for Patrick's. He wasn't dumb enough to hope for the kind of wealth Ted had, but he still wanted to be read. He still wanted to believe that someone might like his words enough to seek them out among all the others. He still wanted to believe that in the cacophony of TV phone-ins and celebrity gossip, books might still count for something.

Neither Ted nor Patrick realised how a few positive words from them could transform his world. Marc could write the phrases for them, give them the adjectives to arrange however they saw fit: not just *pageturning* or *unputdownable*, but *captivating*, *haunting*, *fizzing*, *fresh*, *revelatory*, *miraculous*. It was the currency he lavished on other writers week after week; it seemed only fair that some of it be spent on him. Without a quote, he'd have nothing more to look forward to than some marketing intern telling him there was nothing to build a campaign around. Without the quote, there was only life reeling him back to the draughty room and

the nagging doubt that it was all his talent deserved.

The wind barged him sideways as he stepped out of the sheltering lee of the chalet. He gripped the precious bottle tighter and squinted into the night. The pelting rain stung his eyes. It blinded him to everything but the swimming pool, whose waters glimmered with an eerie phosphorescence, a mineral nestling in the black velvet of the night.

The bluish glow was the only means to navigate through the darkness. Marc shuffled carefully along the ridge above the pool, picking his way among the statues of harpies, fates and sirens. His face ached from grinning joylessly against the wind. He tried to picture himself standing on the threshold of Ted or Patrick's chalet, water torrenting off him, but the idea was now so ridiculous that it was beyond his imagination. Reality had outstripped it. He walked on, uncertain now whether it was from dogged hope or weary fatalism.

When lightning jagged across the sky, Marc looked up from the pool and tried to gauge his position. Someone blocked his path. Eyes blank as a statue's stared into his from a woman's face bleached deathly pale by the sudden light. The vision was a flash photograph that burned onto his retina, so brief he was still processing the details as darkness returned: the twisted, tendrilled hair that writhed across her cheeks; the spectral sheath she wore; the open mouth; the hands that stretched before her, their clammy fingers clutching at his chest.

Unnerved, Marc stepped backward. His foot encountered only air, as if the ground had shifted beneath him. By the time it hit the springy, slippery turf, his precarious balance was already lost. His foot skimmed the earth, then swung into the air once more. He tottered one-legged on the lip of the slope for a moment before something, whether the wind or unseen hands, pushed him off.

The dark tumbled around him. The bottle shot out of his grasp. Earth and sky

slipped and shifted over one another. The phosphorescent pool sped towards him, flashing in and out of sight, a warning light that threatened to consume him. Rough concrete shredded his flesh as he bounced over it, and then he splashed into the pool. Chlorinated water choked his cry of pain. Naked nymphs rushed up from the pool floor to greet him. The Minotaur gored his hip and tossed him onto his back.

For a moment whose length he would never know, Marc laid at the bottom of the pool. Hours, minutes, seconds were the phosphorescent motes that effervesced from his body, a swarm of fireflies that had chosen this moment to hatch. His drenched clothes and the awful weight of the water pressed him to the tiles. Something told him the pool was ready to accept him. The other writers would wake tomorrow and not know to search for the new figure among the mythological scenes. The sleeper. The drowner. The failure. His whole life forgotten in an instant.

Clumsy as a puppet, his body stirred. He couldn't co-ordinate his limbs. They were separate entities reluctant to marshal themselves into coherence. He felt something tug at his ankles as he kicked off the pool floor. He jerked himself free without looking. There was no time. Instinct pushed him upwards, towards the night that lay above the pool like a ceiling of solid jet.

He broke the turbulent surface and gasped for air, then dipped back beneath. Glowing faces flared at him out of the water, their features liquid, constantly melting and reforming. And then he was back above, in the air. His leaden legs thrashed the water while his hands slapped and scrabbled until his fingers grazed the rough concrete of the poolside and he dragged himself to the relative safety of land.

He knelt on the pool's concrete rim. Phosphorescent vomit fizzed out of him and left his stomach knotted and twisted. Strangled cries struggled up from his

throat. Through the tears that clouded his vision, the figures at the pool bottom appeared to slither over one another in an orgy of painted flesh.

Eventually, the vomiting fit passed, but Marc felt barely any relief. His body jerked involuntarily, as if he were still in danger of drowning. The memory of fingers clutched at his chest. But he only realised the full extent of his troubles when he struggled to his feet and looked up: the darkness was so absolute the chalets were effectively not there. He might head back up the slope and stumble blindly past them, into the forest and the ranked trees that would close around him like the bars of a malevolent cage.

He fumbled his lighter out of his pocket and shielded it with his violently trembling hand while he tried to coax sparks from its damp flint. Nothing came. The flintwheel ground to a spirit-sapping halt. Ready to weep with frustration, Marc raised his eyes from the defunct lighter and saw a minor miracle. It was as if the light he'd been trying to call forth had materialised in the distance. Above the slope, where moments earlier there'd been only blackness, a soft, greenish light now glowed in a chalet window.

There was no time to care whose chalet it was. The rain was switching to hail. If he got to the illuminated chalet before the light went out, he'd know the way to his own. He'd stagger to bed and forget this whole ordeal, freshly content to be himself after all. But the black slope towered above him like a cliff. The grass was slick as ice to the touch. Hail stung his knuckles. Several times he neared the top only to slither back towards the pool, his chin juddering painfully through the mud as a rudimentary brake. Twice the jarring impact of his feet on the concrete rim was all that saved him from re-immersion.

The amphitheatre around the pool came to seem more and more like a trap. He was so desperate that when his feet brushed against the bottle of țuică –



miraculously unscathed by its tumble down the slope, though now glowing with the same phosphorescence as the pool – he wasn't even tempted to take a drink. The memory of the blankly staring eyes was too pressing. He stuck the bottle in his waistband instead and made one more effort to haul himself up to the light, away from the pool and whatever prowled through the darkness.

By kicking divots into the wet earth for footholds, Marc finally crested the rim of the slope. His lungs ached from the effort. His body trembled with cold, but his multiple grazes burnt as though freshly branded onto his skin. His only consolation was that the light still glowed in the chalet. He tottered towards it. He knocked on the frosted glass panel of the door, then slumped with his forehead against it and tried to compose a face for whoever was approaching. All he could see was a silhouette whose arms thrashed the air above their head like wild antennae.

Perfume spilt out into the night when the door opened. Candleflames sputtered in the breeze. In the flickering light they cast on the wall, he had a brief flashback to the vision that had sparked into sight in the lightning, but no hands reached for his chest.

—My god, Marc?

—Clarissa? Hi, he said. A brief flush of embarrassment warmed his cheeks as he struggled not to topple forwards. Sorry to disturb you.

—What the hell happened to you?

—I won't stop.

—Don't be ridiculous. Come in, now.

—No, I just wanted—

She gripped his arm and pulled him stumbling across the threshold before he could finish the sentence. Marc was in no state to resist: his legs felt strangely

hollow, as if his entire weight were balanced precariously on straws. The candleflames bent and then righted themselves as Clarissa forced the door shut against the wind. Marc continued to sway. Dizzied, he looked down and saw the remains of his best jeans daubed in mud and leaves. Patches of bloodstained fabric and thin strips of flesh lay visible beneath newly opened tears. A mix of blood and earth covered his palms. He glanced at the huge mirror above the desk, then looked at the water puddling at his feet instead. Detail there was mercifully drowned.

—Here, take this, Clarissa said, thrusting one of the retreat’s mildly abrasive towels at him. It was damp from her hair. Marc raised it numbly to his head.

—Thanks, Clarissa. I’m really sorry about this. I got lost. But I’ll be fine now I know where I am. I’ll just dry off a bit and then head back to my chalet.

—No you won’t, she said. You’re going to have a shower and get the mud out of those cuts before you go anywhere.

—What? Here?

—Don’t worry, Marc. I’m not going to spy on you.

—But I can have a shower at my place.

—Forgive me if I’m prejudging you here, but I’m pretty confident you won’t have a first aid kit lying around. Those cuts need cleaning properly.

—Does it look that bad? he asked.

—Yes, she said. Worse than bad. In the bathroom. Now.

Marc made no attempt to resist the hand that steered him across the room. After the struggle to get here, he felt like he was sleepwalking. Only the pain and Clarissa’s failure to seduce him convinced him he wasn’t dreaming. He’d entertained hopeful fantasies of a holiday tryst with Clarissa Spencer-Hawley ever since he’d seen her name on the guestlist and googled her. Since then, a sly peek at her full-page author photo on *Four for a boy*, the latest instalment in the Inspector

Magpie series, had been an integral part of any visit to a bookshop. During the weeks of proximity here her image had morphed from that unsmiling black-and-white face to a bikini-clad form whose contours he was as familiar with as a lover.

Desire flickered through his exhausted frame as he shuffled after her to the bathroom that still smelt of her recent shower. His fantasies found no reflection in her face. She snapped on the hot tap and watched him expressionlessly as he prised his squelching trainers from his heels. She made no move to help as he hopped woozily against the doorframe to peel his socks free. Their only contact was a brief, probably accidental brush of her body against his when she stepped out of the bathroom.

—OK, Marc. I'll leave you to it. But make sure you get all the dirt out of the cuts. It'll be useless otherwise.

—Yes, Nurse, he ventured, then wished he hadn't.

—And do me a favour, please? I don't know what you were doing out there, but please don't tell anyone about this. I mean, about you being here. I don't want the others getting the wrong idea. OK?

—OK.

### **3: Renaissance man**

WHILE MARC LEANED his head against the tiles in Clarissa's bathroom, Ted leaned his against a window and watched the storm. He'd been in downtown Constanța in a bar with walls the color of a heavy smoker's fingers for over an hour. He was waiting for a call. He was waiting to hear his name.

Names had always been an issue for Ted. Though he'd settled on T. E. Nowakow when he published his first book almost forty years ago, his parents had never relinquished the full weight of the Theodore Edward they'd chiselled from the mass of their immigrant aspirations. Most people he knew settled for Ted, but close friends doubled it to Ted-Ted, and his wife, Charlotte, called him Teddy, a schoolyard name, as if their ages had somehow been reversed and she were the one eighteen years his senior. And for the past seven years, students at Vanderhorn College had called him Professor Nowakow, their voices freighted with awe as they sounded the foreign consonants of his surname, the Ws that were really Vs. Names. He answered to all of them, but none were the one he waited to hear now.

He hadn't exactly been lying when he left the retreat. Today was his son's birthday, and Ted had every intention of calling him at some point. Not even the guilt that Charlotte would try to pass on as the price for his absence would dissuade him from wishing Herman all the best as he shifted into a teenager. But he could have stayed at the shitty retreat and called home from the landline in Luca's office like he'd been doing all trip. Ted had come downtown because he had a different call to make, one he needed to make away from curious ears. A call where a particular student would call him Prof.

Prof: it was a name simultaneously mocking and respectful, both childishly

innocent and dangerously knowing, but always intimate. Erika had first called him it when she'd risen from the couch in his office and turned the latch and closed the blinds while he watched in silence. Prof. She'd called him it every time they'd met since, and soon she'd call him it again and again because two weeks of sex and adoration would be his the minute this dumb retreat was over.

Once he'd received the invitation to Constanța, the rest had followed with ridiculous ease. He'd told Charlotte he wanted to do some research and warned her not to organise any surprise visits. And then he'd booked a suite for a fortnight at the Adlon Kempinski in Berlin. The lies had tumbled out so easily he wondered why he'd never done it before. Students whose names he'd long-forgotten swam through his memory as chances not taken, their phantom faces flickering across Erika's as she lay beneath him as if she could take on any form he wanted. He didn't care that the whole thing would end with her graduation next year. She deserved the trip simply for opening his eyes to the possibilities, for waking him from the sleep of constant fidelity that marriage had lulled him into. Erika had done that, no one else. Now all she needed to do was call him and he'd finally give her the details of the surprise he'd been hinting at for weeks, reveal the full lineaments of his desire.

Ted glanced down at the dim screen of his cellphone. He considered leaving one more message on her voicemail, but the storm's latest fulminating burst had him reaching for something more solid. White light drenched the bar. Thunder drowned out all ambient noise, then seemed to suck it out so that the faint murmur of the television in the corner was the only sound that remained. Words in a language Ted didn't understand: the slick-suited weatherman could have been forecasting Armageddon for all he knew.

Still clinging to the table edge, Ted surveyed the row of faces at the bar. He

hoped for some studied insouciance, a weariness of having seen all of this before. But it was like seeing a gallery of Picasso portraits come to life. Sharp, angular fear contorted their faces. Their gap-toothed mouths gaped open. Their eyes were as wide and white as a terrified horse's. A woman's tears sparkled in the striplighting like glass beads.

When the next bolt flashed above the square, the barman reached up to kill the volume on the set. Now only the buzz of the neon sign above Ted's head disturbed the silence in the bar: someone would always want to sell you something. The noise that mattered was outside: the crack of thunder, the drumming of rain, the rippling of metal shutters. What had seemed solid a moment ago seemed flimsy now. He tried to recall the half-learnt formula for how to divide or multiply the number of seconds between lightning and thunder to calculate the distance, but it was lost along with the one for converting Celsius to Fahrenheit. The older he got, the more temperatures had settled into a simple binary scale of either too hot or too cold. The lightning now was the same: either close or too close, beyond the reach of maths.

Ted edged his seat away from the window that looked as if it were melting in the rain. His legs felt oddly weak. He wondered if he'd manage to walk to the bathroom to shelter there until the storm passed, but then, as though Erika had sensed his terror, his phone rang. Its shrill ring echoed around the bar in counterpoint to the bullfrog rumble of its vibration on the metal table. Erika's name flashed on the screen, a sign calling him back to a world where this storm didn't exist and thunder and lightning could never harm him.

—Hello gorgeous, Ted said.

—Asshole.

—Hello? Ted asked, forcing the word past the fear that constricted his

throat. His voice sounded alien to his ears, but the word was already out, shooting from antennae to mast to satellite dish, hurtling through space to deflect off a distant satellite and into the ear of someone whose only identification with Erika was her name on his cellphone screen. Erika wasn't male. And nothing he'd done yet warranted Erika calling him an asshole, let alone a fat moron son of a fucking bitch.

—Who the hell is this? What are you doing with Erika's phone?

In the seconds he waited for an answer, a terrifying hydra formed in his head: boyfriends of every shape, size and hue, desperate for revenge. Their eyes burned with the cuckold's fury. Knives glittered in hands. Sunlight glinted off pistols. Biceps swollen by endless hours in the gym rippled with purpose.

—What do you care about Erika, you selfish bastard? Do you have any idea what you've done? You sick fuck. You're old enough to be her grandfather. How could you? My daughter?

The final word explained almost everything. The nightmarish colossus of boyfriends shrank to one man and his impotent fury. Ted had never seen a picture, but it was easy to imagine him: an uglier, harsher version of Erika, age and anger making his face as red and wrinkled as a newborn's.

—Your daughter is a consenting adult, Mr—

—A consenting adult? Is that the best you can do? You seduce my daughter and then you try tell me it was her fault? Let me guess. It was her decision to get pregnant too?

Pregnant. Ted felt sick to the core, like when he'd watched the second plane approach the World Trade Center. The word shattered his vanity, a blossoming rose of a fireball that left an all-consuming emptiness.

—Pregnant? he said, stumbling over the word like a foreigner saying it for

the first time.

—That’s right, asshole. Pregnant.

—Can’t she get an—

—Abortion? You want my daughter to have an abortion? You want Erika to murder her child? Forget it, you fat fuck. That’s your child, Nowakow, your child, and she’s having it. And I don’t give a fuck that you’re going to lose your job or how much money your poor wife screws you for, you are going to pay for every penny of that child’s life. Every damn diaper. You got that? How’d you like that, Prof? What shitty story are you going to write about th—

Ted cut him off, but the feeling of power and control it gave him soon dissipated. Every number he had for Charlotte was busy. And when his agent failed, for the first time in ten years, to answer the phone that Ted paid for, Ted hung up sure that the news was already abroad. He was now Professor T. E. Nowakow, the disgraced writer who couldn’t keep his pen out of the inkwell. The meaning of his name had changed forever.

There was nothing he could do. Whichever way he looked at it, he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. By the time he flew back to the States, everything would be set, finished. The end of his marriage. The end of the blur of college kids with names as outlandish as anagrams. The end of being paid a small fortune to shepherd their misplaced dreams of success away from the truth with comments that were themselves careful fictions.

Tears of frustration scalded the backs of his eyes. Was Erika really so pro-life she couldn’t have an abortion? Or had she been thinking all along how good it would be for her career? Famous before she’d even published a short story. He remembered with a shudder of rage the feel of her leg hooking around him to pull him deeper inside her; what he’d thought was a moment of senseless forgetting



now seemed a calculated act that locked him into a future he'd never chosen. His life had been a great, glowing, fragile crystal; he'd dropped it to the floor.

It was already too late to think he should have known better. He was supposed to be the great brooding intellect of his nation, a writer *The New York Times* claimed understood the politics of American private lives better than anyone. Instead, he found himself transposed into something far too close to the plot of his first novel, *Nocturne in Ash and Blood*. He'd become Frank, the married man who spends the eve of his third wedding anniversary pounding the streets of New York to arrange an abortion for his mistress, Jean. The abortion achieved and Jean lying groggily in bed in her lousy apartment, Frank promises he'll be back the next day, though he knows he'll never see her again. He goes into a deli on his way home and eats a salami sandwich, smothering it in mustard until every last vestige of the taste of flesh has been drowned, then hails a cab to go home to his wife.

A young man's novel, written from the urgency of imagination and little else, it had connected magically with the times. People everywhere had been demanding the right to choose and they seized on *Nocturne* as their talisman. For months, it was impossible to board a subway car without seeing a copy. He was barely twenty-one years old and journalists flew across oceans to interview him. People wanted to know what he thought about the war, about peace, about love. It was the start of an enchanted period in which the world had consistently shaped itself to his desires; but that period had ended tonight. There'd be no abortion: all those placards and marches and interviews counted for nothing. He wasn't Frank, and Erika clearly wasn't Jean. Life was never as tidy as fiction. Actions spun off the page, created their own narratives. You thought it was your story and then you realized it had been someone else's all along.

Ted took a swig of beer and stared at his dark reflection floating in the

glass. His eyes stared back at him, heavy with defeat. His skin looked gray. His jowls hung loose and flabby. It was an image of a ramshackle loser waiting for him to step inside its skin and become what everyone would soon believe him to be. The injustice of it all burned his veins.

The face in the window curled into a sneer. So the dumb mutt had got herself pregnant. Did that mean he had to wave a white flag and let the lawyers decide the rest of his life? Could he not write his own story? Was he still the same coward who'd changed the original ending of *Nocturne* because he worried what his mother might think? Still the same idiot who'd fretted that Ros, the high-school sweetheart who'd clung to him like an American cliché, would misread it as some crooked autobiography? In his heart, Frank has always abandoned both women. He finishes the sandwich and heads to Grand Central with no more than ten dollars and a packet of cigarettes to call his own, but with his freedom. Ted could still have his. He might have been lured into a distorted version of Frank's narrative, but he could give it the ending it had always deserved. He didn't have to go back to the States. Nobody had ever gotten extradited for being an errant father.

A lightning bolt smashed down into the square outside. Ted winced in anticipation of the boom, cringed in fear of breaking glass. A negative of the street floated momentarily across his vision, all white and seasick greens and iodine blues, but when his sight cleared he saw a different face in the window. The deadbeat loser of moments before had vanished. It was his face again, the face of a man who knew the story he was going to write. He'd always believed he was a giant, now circumstances would prove him the true heir of Ovid, of Dante, of Joyce. Exile came with the territory. He'd pine for Manhattan, but he'd lived there so long its street grid was in his DNA, as real in his head as any bricks and mortar. And he had money, the choice of where to go. There was Berlin, London,

Barcelona, Paris, an atlas infinite with opportunity.

A succession of images flickered through his mind, picture postcard views of a writer's happy exile: typing at a desk that overlooked the Eiffel tower; the warm, indulgent laughter of a raven-haired señorita beneath strings of lights in a Spanish square; his breath clouding before him on a starlit stroll through the Tiergarten; room service delivering a telegram that told him the Swedes had finally tracked him down.

Yet even as the images floated alluringly before his mind's eye, Ted knew none of them were real. They were dreams of escape that would crumble at their first brush with reality. They would disappear. He couldn't. That was reality.

Reality was his face caught on security cameras he didn't know existed. Reality was his passport logged onto a central system. Reality was the way his every email, every transaction, every call could be traced. Reality was a global village of gossips and spies, where everyone assumed the right to know where you were, who you were with, what you were doing. Reality was the renewed shrill ringing of his cellphone and Erika's name flashing across its screen.

There was no escape.

Rage flared within him. Ted grasped the phone so tightly his fingers flushed crimson around it. Its vibrating silver body felt like a fish trying to slither free of a hunter's grasp. He squeezed tighter. He sensed this was his chance to free himself of everything. Holding the phone edgewise, like a comb, Ted gave one exploratory tap on the table edge, then raised it above his head and smashed it down.

The vibrations ceased on the second impact; Ted didn't stop. The phone would forever be a creature of torment. He had to slay it. Keys flew into the air like teeth. Metal crumpled like bone. An oily rainbow of colours oozed through cracks in the shattered screen, the iridescent lifeblood of this tormenting beast. His glass

jumped off the table and smashed, but still he wouldn't stop, merely changed tack: he cast the mangled remains of the phone onto the floor, then stood and stamped and crunched it into submission, grinding the SIM card into a puddle of beer and glass from which it would never again betray his whereabouts.

A hand clamped down on Ted's shoulder. He reached up and smacked it away. Snarling like a cornered animal, he turned to face whoever had dared touch him. It was the waiter: a monolith whose barrel chest strained against every button.

—Out! the waiter barked. Out!

—Are you fucking crazy? Have you seen the storm out there?

—Out! Raus!

The hand returned to Ted's shoulder with increased vigour. He wilted beneath it, powerless: one moment he was trying to eyeball the waiter, the next he'd been spun around, left looking helplessly at the window and the rows of reflected faces staring at him like ghosts trapped in the storm outside. Ted tried being angry. Ted tried being contrite. Ted tried begging for forgiveness for the sake of his unborn child. It made no difference. He had no idea if they spoke English, but language didn't interest these people, or culture, or reputation. This went deeper. What interested them was driving him out into the storm, a scapegoat. The same force that had spun him around now propelled him towards the door as if he weighed fifty pounds, not two hundred and fifty.

Laughter echoed around the bar as his feet skimmed helplessly across the bruised linoleum. A local whose gold-toothed grin crackled with lightning slipped past Ted and opened the door. The wind and rain punched Ted in the face. For one final moment of respite, he clutched the metal doorframe and braced himself against the hands that heaved at his shoulders, but he knew he was only delaying the inevitable. The moment would come. He closed his eyes, ready to be cast out

into the night.

A voice shouted behind him. The laughter stopped. The voice shouted again. Ted didn't understand what was said, but he felt the hands at his shoulders relax. Unresisted, he took a step backwards, away from the threshold. Slowly, he dared believe that someone had ended the lunacy. He wriggled free of the waiter's grasp and turned in search of his saviour.

A guy Ted assumed was the owner stood behind the bar and yelled again at the waiter. Stocky and bald, he gestured towards the table where Ted had sat, then out at the storm, as if driving home the impossibility of their treatment. The waiter started to grumble something in reply, then shrank before another tirade and a furious semaphore of violently jabbing arms. Defeated, he turned to Ted with a scowl. He muttered something beneath his breath. Then, as Ted risked a commiserating smile, the waiter smacked the heel of his hand into Ted's ribcage.

Ted staggered backwards. Only the force of the wind kept him upright. Part of him wished he'd fallen over. As he watched the waiter rub his fingers together in demand, Ted finally understood the extent of his vanity. The argument he'd just witnessed had never been about sparing him from the storm. It was about money. This was their idea of hospitality: you paid them to throw you out. Another blow to his chest rammed the point home, sent him tottering to the door.

Anger surged through him, an animal rage. He tore the wad of bills from his pocket and said: —How much, asshole? How much? Twenty? fifty? a hundred?

Lei and dollars and euros slid out of the money clip, a blur of colour and numbers that mesmerised everyone in the bar. By the time he stopped, Ted knew he held more in his hand than these people earned in a month. To him it was nothing. He curled his fingers around the thick wad of greasy paper, held it up to the unsuspecting waiter and thrust it into his nose.

— You want the money? Take it. Come on! Ted screamed, driving the wad of bills back into the unprotected face. Ted hadn't been in a barroom brawl since the eighties, but his muscles remembered. The beast of fury that had lain dormant for years reawoke. It sent a table and chairs crashing to the floor. It guided a savage elbow into the face of whoever clawed at his shoulder. It pursued the waiter's stumbling course backward and struck him again and again, savouring the crunch of bone and cartilage. It was all the beast. The beast wanted to force the notes down the waiter's throat. The beast wanted to make the waiter breathe money until he choked. The beast didn't stop until blood dyed a crimson sash across the waiter's filthy shirt.

With his hands and the wad of bills sticky with blood, Ted stepped back. A curious peace descended upon him. He let out a low growl of satisfaction and turned to walk towards the rain and the wind, towards the rectangle of darkness. Nobody stopped him. The local who'd gleefully thrown open the door moments before now covered behind it, desperate not to be noticed.

At the threshold, Ted turned and surveyed the carnage he'd wrought. Furniture lay scattered and broken on the floor. Blood spilled over the waiter's cupped hands while his boss knelt beside him, murmuring in his ear. The whole bar shrank from Ted's gaze, but nobody dared look away. Ted grinned. He held his hand aloft, listened for a moment to the bills snap and flutter in the wind, then released the money into the storm. The bills shot from his hand. They flattened themselves against cars, lost themselves as leaves in the branches, spiralled towards the streetlights like exotically patterned moths, a flurry of colours bleeding into flight as he turned from the horrified gazes in the bar and swaggered into the night.

The wind and the rain plastered his clothes to him, but he never considered

returning for the jacket he'd abandoned on the chair. In the hubris of the moment he imagined himself invincible. The parked cars appeared to cringe at his approach and obsequiously opened a passage to the center of the square.

He'd lost all track of time and had no idea where he was going, but he no longer cared. He was so wonderfully alive to the world he could trace the fall of individual raindrops and feel their self-destructive spatter on his cheek; he felt the wind tug at his outstretched arms as if it would release him from the dreary clutch of gravity. All the doubts and insecurities of earlier lifted from him. Ted knew who he was. He was T. E. Nowakow, writer; in the here and in the now. He was T. E. Nowakow. He was Ted. He was—

And then he wasn't. Lightning forked from the sky and struck the crown of his head. His body shook as it scorched through his veins. His mouth opened in a silent scream. His blood turned to light. Bolts of electricity jagged from his outstretched fingers as if he were a thunder god that could no longer contain his wrath. The world flickered and changed before his vision. Light was darkness; darkness light. His solid flesh threatened to melt into air. He drew the electricity from the sky, and such energy could not leave him unchanged. Double helixes that had remained stable for nearly sixty years twisted madly, splintered, broke apart, scrambled in a shifting storm of proteins. When the lightning exhausted itself, they settled into whatever sequence they could. Most fell into the familiar patterns. Others never had the chance.

When he crumpled to the ground, he was neither wholly Ted nor wholly something else.

Initially, the shock was to be alive at all. Gasping for air and on all fours, but alive. Still in the world. He blinked with oddly heavy eyes and looked around the dim square. A thick mist of steam rose from the cobbles. Scorched bark hung

off trees like flayed flesh. Lights flickered on and off. A shop sign hanging from its final screw beat out an urgent tattoo on shutters as it swung to and fro in the wind that now sent an empty coke can bouncing across the square towards him.

Ted grunted as the can struck him on the snout. In search of shelter from the wind, he crawled towards the row of cars. The cobbles were painfully hard beneath him but he wasn't ready to stand yet. His head felt too heavy. Electricity still crackled up and down his spine.

It was only as he prepared to slump against a car that he finally glimpsed what he'd become. He recoiled in terror and scrambled away down the line of cars, but the image trailed him wherever he went: a strangely luminous blur, a flickering shape of light that came into definition the moment he stopped. Not realising the light was his, still hoping he could somehow flee it, Ted tried to get up. But the hand he moved to push himself up to his feet wasn't the hand he'd always known. Bewildered, he lifted it before his face. It bore a web of cracks like badly glazed pottery. Warts studded it like armour. The skin bristled with light.

He raised his other hand: it was identical. And now he noticed the nimbus of light that flickered along his arm, soft and indefinable, fuzzy, as if his body was uncertain of its status.

Ted struggled to breathe. He crawled closer to the cars and sought out his reflection in the dark metallic depths. A rhinoceros head stared back at him, its eyes serious with his own incomprehension. The horn that sprouted from his head radiated the blue afterglow of lightning. Ted watched the reflection of his hand move towards it as if it were on a TV screen, hoping the image might still prove to be a hallucination, the necessary price to pay for his miraculous survival. But it was definitely his hand he watched approach the horn; definitely his fingers that briefly touched it before they jerked back from its shocking heat.



He rose to his knees and struggled to inspect himself in the wing mirror. It was impossible: his head was too big, too clumsy, too brutish to manoeuvre into the gap. He bumped his head against the door in frustration. Then something hit him from behind and drove his snout deeper into the metal. He tried to pull his snout clear of the freshly formed dent, but another blow fell, hard and heavy across the back of his head, and drove him back into the door.

One more blow would probably have knocked him unconscious, but the pain sparked his senses into full, animal life. With his face still squashed against the car's crumpled wing, Ted didn't see the iron bar swing towards him a third time. He felt it in the disturbance it made in the air. He heard its softly swinging swoosh beneath the wind. He smelt its ferrous tang as he dragged his head clear, shimmered to the side and left the bar to swing through air and thud into the car.

At that moment, there was still time for Ted to run. Time for him to disappear into the streets while the waiter's arm shuddered with the unexpected impact. Time for him to escape and make this a different story.

Ted didn't move. He crouched on all fours as though savouring his anger, waiting for its release. The waiter turned and hefted the bar once more, then dropped it to the floor in surprise. The clang echoed briefly around the deserted square. The waiter backed away. His mouth moved urgently beneath his crushed nose in a final, voiceless prayer.

Lightning flashed above the square. Its blue glow lingered impossibly long, spotlighting the confrontation. Ted lowered his head. The tendons in his neck tensed like steel cables beneath his newly thick flesh. His eyes glittered in the hard blue light. The waiter's stumbling retreat had only carried him a car's length away. Ted flashed across the space in an instant and drove his lightning blue horn deep into the waiter's chest.

#### 4: The story cage

THERE'D BEEN NO time to think when Clarissa had pulled Marc into her chalet. It was an instinctive reaction to seeing him there, looking like he'd been attacked. There'd been nothing more to it. But as the water drummed against the bath, she grew convinced that someone had seen them. She had no idea why he was here but she knew why they'd think he was. The wrong idea was already out there, proliferating in the darkness.

Yet when Marc finally stepped out of the bathroom, it was hard to maintain any serious concerns about her reputation. Dressed in her fluffy, pink dressing gown and with his head framed by a cloud of steam he looked like a cherub that had suffered a sudden growth spurt, as unthreatening as Hercules amongst the women. She stopped listening for footfalls beneath the rumour of the trees bending and reforming outside and found herself returning his nervous smile. This wasn't what she'd had planned for the evening, but she was tired of trying to read *Metamorphoses* by candlelight while the storm picked relentlessly at the chalet roof like fingers at a troublesome scab.

—Here. Sit down, she said. Let's have a look at you.

Marc shuffled across the room like a sleepy toddler and lowered himself stiffly beside her. The wicker sofa creaked beneath this new burden.

—Can we have a drink first, please?

—Are you sure that's a good idea?

—Please, Clarissa. I know it's nothing great, but it might warm me up.

—Didn't the shower do that?

—Have you got any glasses or do we have to drink from the bottle?

Clarissa retrieved a mug from her desk and then went into the bathroom for her glass. His wet, muddy clothes hung over the shower curtain rail like the emptied shell of a man. But Marc was undeniably present in her chalet. As she moved back to the sofa she noticed the vivid gash on his calf. The bloody graze disappeared below the hem of the dressing gown, into shadow.

—So are you going to tell me what the hell you were doing out there? she said, handing him the glass and mug. Marc didn't answer. He glugged the syrupy brandy into the mug and glass and filled them to the brim. He pressed the glass into her hand, then clinked the mug against it so hard that brandy slopped over onto her fingers. Marc didn't notice: his head was tilted back, brandy dribbling down his chin. He didn't look at her until he'd refilled the mug and placed the nearly empty bottle on the coffee table.

—Sorry, he said. I needed that.

—So I can see, she said. She took a sip of the brandy, which made no effort to conceal the artificiality of its fruit flavours. She waited for her grimace to pass before she lowered the glass and asked Marc why he'd been out in the storm.

—Because I was bored of the power cut and then I saw a light in your window and I wondered if you wanted a drink.

—And what? You decided to crawl here?

—I fell over.

—How many times?

—I lost count, he said.

Something in his look dissuaded her from teasing him any further. She didn't believe he'd battled across the storm purely to see her, but as she sipped and shuddered her way through another mouthful of the brandy, part of her wanted to. It would be nice to think, if only for a moment, that someone in the retreat saw her

as another writer, an equal.

Given Ted's fame, it was virtually inevitable that he'd see it as his God-given right to look down on them all. But that everyone else seemed to feel they could look down at her in turn was much harder to take. With terse reviews tucked away in the monthly crime roundup but her books nudging onto the bestseller lists, she was the despised opposite, the negative of their cherished picture of fame. By earning out her advances, she'd paid for theirs, but they repaid her with scorn. She desperately wanted to dazzle everyone at the debate with her insights into Ovid, but even if she did, she knew it would make no difference. She'd always remain a genre writer in their eyes, a sub-intellect paid to write words nobody would remember. Her stories had made a cage she couldn't escape. Anne looked at her each morning as if shocked she hadn't yet fled in shame, Patrick interrupted her every sentence and Ted had spent the whole retreat addressing her breasts.

But Marc had come. Marc had braved the rain and the hailstones and the gales. Marc was here.

—So are you going to let me have a look at your cuts?

—You don't have to, really, he stammered. I'm sure they're okay.

—You'd probably say the same if your leg was hanging off, she said, surprising herself with this sudden confidence in Marc's habits. Let me have a look.

Shyly, Marc hitched the skirt of the dressing gown up over his thigh. Clarissa picked up a candle and brought it closer, careful not to shed any light on the dark area above the hem of the dressing gown. The bloody graze was nothing serious, the kind of wound whose severity lessened the moment nobody sympathetic was within range.

—Do you think I'll survive? he said.

Disconcerted, Clarissa put the candle back on the coffee table to conceal the blush that crept to her cheeks. His grin was too intimate. It made her feel as though she were the one sitting half-naked in a virtual stranger's room.

She poked a tube of ointment at him across the small gap between them.

—You should put some of this on. It'll help.

—No, it's alright. Thanks, but I'll manage.

—Seriously. It'll make it heal quicker.

Marc took the tube from her with such obedience that guilt flashed through her as he smeared the first blob onto the open cut. Moments later, his face contorted with the sting. When he looked at her his eyes glistened as if he'd been cheated.

—Sorry, she said. It makes your eyes water at first but it wears off pretty quickly.

—I'll take your word for it, he said, then exhaled dramatically before asking – as if there was nothing more mundane – how her work was going.

—Tell me about yours first, she said. It'll take your mind off the sting. What's it called again?

Marc appeared to forget about the stinging ointment in an instant. He repositioned himself slightly, then launched into such an animated exposition of his *Work in Progress* that Clarissa suspected he'd practised it many times before, honed it to perfection before the mirror. The words poured forth untroubled, doubled back on themselves, enmeshed; but Clarissa soon lost track. Marc's question about her own writing had ambushed her mind. She watched his mouth open and close as if he were speaking to her from behind glass. All she could think about was *Inspector Magpie*: the series that had made her relatively famous and provided the deposit for her Hampstead flat; the series she could no longer write.

*One for sorrow* had been easy enough (a manic depressive turned homicidal by the drugs he was taking) and *Two for joy* (a serial killer who etches a clown's smile into each of his victim's faces) proved a pleasure to write in the giddy rush of having secured an agent and found herself the subject of an unexpected bidding war. *Three for a girl* (a series of grisly murders of teenage prostitutes) and *Four for a boy* (a group of Catholic priests murdered by a man they'd abused as a child) had slotted easily into the formula and secured an ITV deal. Her author photo had shifted to the home page of her agency's website. Ivan, her agent, seemed to wear a brand new item of clothing every time they met, and never let a phone conversation go by without purring his excitement about the forthcoming instalment.

His purr would turn to a pained yowl if he knew the truth. Clarissa had been spinning him a story for months now. What he thought was a work close to completion had not passed beyond the title page. In fact, if she was honest, it didn't even have a title page.

The rhyme she'd learnt as a child said it was *Five for silver*, but that wasn't, it transpired, the synoptic version. Ivan swore it was *Five for rich*, and confidently assured her he should know, while some anonymous knowall on wikipedia claimed it was *Five for heaven*. Whichever one she chose would dictate the following novel. Silver and rich were close enough to pass off with more or less the same plot, but *Six for gold* and *Six for poor* were hardly interchangeable, and *Six for hell* sounded like a Satanist's numbers primer. There were no answers. Old knowledge was flawed.

So now she woke every night only moments after falling asleep and watched the figures of the alarm clock slip closer to the point in two months' time when Ivan was expecting delivery of a typescript. They melted remorselessly into the darkness, a past she could never recover.

Lying there, she'd try to imagine what her life would have been without *Magpie*. What if she'd ignored her friends' advice when her first novel had been rejected? What if, instead of writing a detective novel, she'd written something she wanted to read herself? What if she'd never agreed to carry on the series? But the past was the only landscape she knew. Trying to erase *Magpie* from it was like trying to imagine London without the Thames.

Thunder boomed incredibly close. The room flooded back into her senses. Marc was looking at her. His mouth had stopped moving.

—That sounds really interesting, she ventured.

—Thanks, that's really kind of you to say so. But come on, it's your turn now. How's yours going? You never really talk about it at dinner.

—O, we don't need to talk about that. I know you're not really interested, she said.

Avoiding his gaze, she looked down and inadvertently caught a glance of bare thigh as Marc shifted on the sofa. She tried to remember if any underwear had been hanging with the rest of his muddy clothes.

—There's no need to blush, Clarissa. Seriously, I'm interested. It must be great to be writing a series like that.

—How do you mean?

—Finishing one book and having the next one lined up, already knowing what it's going to be about. I mean, with yours the title's ready and everything.

—It's not quite that simple, she said, sitting upright. You still have to work out the plot. If it was only a matter of the title, everyone would be writing series.

—Of course, he said. It'd just be one series after another. Everyone'd spend their whole lives on tenterhooks, waiting for the next release.

She didn't know if he was patronising her or not. All she knew was that her

body felt uncomfortably small for her organs, as if there were no longer room for air to enter, nor space for her heart to flex. She was about to be found out.

—But come on, he said, leaning towards her in a show of enthusiasm. What's the new one about? How does it go again? One for sorrow, two for joy. Three for a girl, four for a boy. Five for mnnff-

Her lips muffled the question, pressed him into silence. She didn't pull away until she was certain he wouldn't speak.

Marc's mouth hung limp. His slow breath feathered over her. He looked at her like she was a stranger. A thick band of his flesh bisected the soft pink of her dressing gown. Ointment curled slowly out of the tube he held in his hand.

Clarissa breathed deeply. She glanced at the shuttered windows and the blind she'd closed over the door pane. Nobody was there. She'd been so worried about people getting the wrong idea, she'd never allowed herself to admit she found Marc even vaguely attractive. But now the wrong idea seemed right. Things made sense. Her actions felt inevitable, parts of a story that had long been written. She looked at his bewildered face rimmed in candlelight and smiled. She took the tube from his unresisting grasp and placed it on the table. Then she leaned forward and kissed him again.



## **5: The ghosts of the night**

AT DAWN, A band of pale, watery light hovered above the still treetops. Like the final pulsing of the storm's electricity, it ebbed and waned against the darkness until the sun crested the horizon and reclaimed the world. No wisp of cloud lingered in the bright, breezeless air it illuminated. The sky was a blank page that promised a story of light, of brilliance, of eternally new beginnings.

The earth told a different story. Daylight revealed the storm's traces everywhere. Terracotta roofs bore snakeskin patterns of missing tiles. Shutters hung limp as broken wings from groaning hinges. Broken windows nurtured jagged wounds of darkness that failed to reflect the sun. Television aerials still trailing their cables lay speared into the ground like harpoons. Cars bore the crumpled impressions of objects and bodies that had long since moved to other areas of the city.

In the forest, animals emerged from hollows and borrowed burrows into a radically transformed world. The summer sun cast wintry shadows of trees whose half-stripped branches clawed at the light. Thick, sappy tears dripped from headless flower stalks. A slick carpet of leaves and petals lay thick on the ground, a burial shroud for fallen birds.

The storm had accelerated nature's reclamation of State Hunting Lodge #1. The thin track through the forest was now barely visible. The herm at the gatepost stared in stony affront at the fallen tree that lay across the entrance, its roots a medusa's head flecked with soil and crawling with insects. But other portals to the grounds had opened: in several places the wire fence hung forlornly from leaning posts. Leaves and vegetation clung to it, forming camouflage netting for a redoubt

that had already been conquered.

Within the grounds, the rain had dyed the buildings a deeper grey. Slimy moss spread over their walls, the revenge of the organic on the moulded concrete planks and their fake, endlessly replicated wood grain. Tubular steel garden furniture lay crumpled together like a ball of wire wool; gaudy, sodden cushions hung trapped in high branches and dripped dye. Branches and newly fallen boughs rose from the grass like emerging predators. Toppled dustbins dribbled waste from their open mouths while water from defrosted meat freezers seeped across the kitchen floor in a pale pink serum. And at the pool, a thick brown impasto of leaves and earth and twigs floated on the water, obscuring the mosaics and their stories.

Patrick was the first writer to wake. Hostile sunlight streamed through the unshuttered windows and found him spreadeagled on the floor. He woke with a start and immediately tried to raise himself, as if the flight reflex had only been on pause for the night. But the night on the floor tiles had left his limbs all but paralysed. A brief commando crawl ended long before he reached the distant bed. He flopped to the ground, exhausted, unable to bear the terrible weight of his hollow bones and his empty, throbbing head. Even the sofa was too far. Ignoring the sour whisky aftertaste on his breath, he closed his eyes and laid his head in the crook of his stiff arm, desperate for more sleep.

Memories jagged in from the other side of consciousness. Day became night. The smell of charred shit flooded the room. The roach typed. Luminous words slid over a petrol black shell and dripped towards the floor. A voice hissed in anger.

Patrick whimpered with delayed terror. His fingers scrabbled for leverage on the unyielding tiles. His feet slipped backwards. He risked a look back toward the desk. Sight confirmed what his dulled hearing had been telling him since he awoke.

The cockroach wasn't typing.

The cockroach wasn't there.

Patrick looked at the empty desk chair, but the sight wasn't enough to dispel the ghost of his fear. He raised himself onto an elbow and scoured the room, dropped his head to examine beneath the bed and the sofa, then painfully craned his neck to peer into each of the corners. There was nothing. A cautious sniff of the air returned no scent more acrid than his own stale sweat. And after a brief high-pitched whine, the only animals his hearing aid transmitted were the birds singing the world back into familiar existence.

Calmer now, he slumped back to the floor and pressed his head against the cool tiles. He recollected what he could. Undoubtedly, the typing roach was one of the strangest visions he'd ever had, but in the daylight his memories were already losing their fevered intensity. He recalled banging his head the second time he'd fallen, but he felt sure he must have taken another knock the first time he'd gone down. There was no other explanation. He'd hit his head and then he'd seen the cockroach.

He glanced across at the desk for corroboration. Nothing moved. Nothing had changed. His laptop remained where he'd left it, its screen illuminated only by the dull reflection of the room. He looked out at the cloudless sky and felt tempted to dismiss the whole night as a figment of the imagination, from the storm to the scuttling feet he'd heard as clearly as a ticking watch pressed to the ear. This was a new day, a different order of reality to contend with. But there was something he had to check first.

Patrick laboured to his feet. His face scrunched with the effort. His chest felt tender as a giant bruise, as if he'd smoked forty cigarettes in his sleep. Each step forward was a delicate negotiation between the ache in his left shin and the pulsing, stinging pain in his right thigh.

In the time he took to hobble across to the desk, he felt he'd aged ten years. He clutched the edge of the desk and gingerly lowered himself to the chair. Up close, things looked exactly as they had last night, offered all the reassurance of unchanging objects. Pens and pencils fanned untidily over his scribbled chapter plan. The ball of blu tac he'd brought from England still bristled with tiny hairs and fluff. Postcard reproductions of Goya paintings and the comically mistranslated welcome letter to the retreat continued to decorate the wall behind the desk.

Nothing had changed, but the more he stared at his silhouette in the laptop screen, the more it seemed to challenge his version of events. He remembered the words he'd bashed out and his failed attempt to save them from the power cut, but their potential loss didn't trouble him anywhere near as much as the prospect of jagged luminous text covering the screen in their place.

Warily, Patrick reached out and pressed the laptop's power button. It failed to respond. Obeying the phantom IT helpline in his head, he reached across the desk, unplugged the laptop, counted to thirty and then plugged it in again. The battery lights remained dead. Patrick couldn't help smiling: he'd lost a couple of hours' work but had gained a renewed grip on his sanity in return.

With the cockroach firmly relegated to fantasy, Patrick could afford to deal with other things, like the way sitting down had exacerbated the pain in his thigh. He pushed the chair back and saw the normally loose fabric of his trousers stretched uncomfortably taut over a lump the size of a toddler's fist. What had he done to it? He tried to remember what could have caused it, but he was too distracted by the thought of all the things the lump might be to think straight. *Lump*. How did a word so short, so clumsy, so thick as it flopped off the tongue raise such panic in him? *Lump*. First his father, then his mother, then Rachel: each death started with a lump, a fatal seed that sprouted beneath the skin.

Tearing at his belt and fumbling with his trouser buttons, Patrick shuffled over to the window. He studied the lump as if looking alone could assure him it wasn't cancerous. In the dawn light, the lump was a crimson hummock rising from his pale flesh, simultaneously solid and springy beneath his tentative prod. A thin film of colourless liquid glistened on top of it, but there was no discernible hole from which it could leak. He felt his fear subside a little. Cancerous lumps didn't leak fluid or erupt from the skin with such alacrity. Cancerous lumps were subtler. Cancerous lumps had the fibrous quality his fingers still remembered from when Rachel had walked pale into the bedroom and asked him to feel beneath her breast. It was probably a bad reaction to an insect bite, nothing more. He didn't need to worry. He vaguely remembered slapping something on his thigh as he walked back from dinner. In fact, in some ways the lump offered him further proof how confused he'd been the previous night: however large the lump was, he was certain that, if the cockroach had been real, its savage mandibles would have left a much bigger mark.

Relieved and with his trousers still riding around his knees, he moved over to the bed and hunted out from the bedside table the antihistamines and paracetamol his daughter had packed for him. He took two of each. They were the first steps in regaining his body from the night. The next would be sleep.

The bed sank invitingly beneath him. He squinted at his watch. There was still another hour before breakfast, assuming they had any power. He closed his eyes, fumbled his hearing aid from his aching ear and reached over to put it on the bedside table. His fingertips brushed something cold and unpleasantly wet. The substance lingered on them after he'd dropped the hearing aid. Patrick opened his eyes. When he pulled his fingertips apart, threads thin as spider webs formed between them and caught the light like shot silk.

Slowly, he turned his head to examine the bedside table. A shallow puddle of viscous fluid now lay where his untouched copy of *Metamorphoses* had been acting as a hearing aid stand. The fluid was colourless, but its surface shifted with oily rainbows in the light.

For a moment, Patrick's hand hovered nervously above the puddle, a finger extended to dip in and explore. But something, whether fatalism or fatigue, changed his mind. He was tired of his imagination and all its ridiculous flights of fancy. He told himself it was another accident, one more fragment of the night he would grasp later. Shower gel spilt when he'd drunkenly sent the furniture flying and set the room trembling. There was no need to investigate. The empty bottle and the copy of *Metamorphoses* would both be gathering dust beneath the bed. He'd search them out when he felt up to it. But not now. Not now when exhaustion dragged at his eyelids and the burning in the lump had subsided to something like a gentle simmer.

He was so dog-tired that even yawning was an effort. Getting undressed was out of the question. A precautionary tug of his trousers below his knees to prevent the waistband stealing up on the lump in his sleep was enough. He shuffled to the centre of the mattress, like a child wary of monsters beneath the bed, and closed his eyes, grateful for the lulling warmth of the sun on his face, blind to the glistening lump on his thigh and the rainbow patterns that shifted and bloomed upon it like a creature stirring to life.

Moments later, a saucepan lid clattered to the tiled floor of the kitchen and woke Anne. It segued into her dream as a gong announcing an arrival, a figure that never materialised. There were only fragments of speech, curses in a foreign language that continued after she opened her eyes, an angry chorus beneath the chatter of

birdsong. As she came round, she struggled at first to understand why the voices of the staff sounded so clear, or why breakfast smelt so intensely. Then she looked at the door.

Whether by the wind or the itinerant thieves that Luca constantly warned them against, the door had been forced open in the night. The floor was a chaotic sea of scattered papers, pencils, pens, books, clothes, passport, photos, sunglasses, and postcards still unsent. The luminous green stuffed dragon her grandson had given her lay helplessly beneath a sheet of paper, a dayglo Ahab sucked beneath a white wave.

She sat up to scan the room for things missing, but was immediately distracted by the cold feel of her nightdress against her. The sodden, translucent fabric clung to her like an unwanted skin. She sought out her face in the mirror above the desk – more concerned now by how much she'd sweated in the night than by the chaos in the room – but one look was enough to make her turn away from the unbearable terror on her face. Whatever had happened in the room was far less disturbing than the fact she'd slept through it. She'd been as good as dead: the world had shown her how easily it would continue without her.

Tiredness still dogged her as she began to pick her way around the room and inspect the damage. It clearly hadn't been thieves: everything from the dragon's fake fur to the scattered papers was damp to the touch, but present, intact. A smudgy orange and blue nimbus now illuminated the margins of her pages, as if the black ink were the secret chrysalis of a varicoloured butterfly, but the writing remained legible. And for that, if nothing else, Anne gave thanks: there was no reason to regret her recent return to longhand after all.

Anne was no Luddite. Her writing career had seen her move first from pen and paper to a typewriter and the carbon copies that now sat brown and thin as

onion skins in her attic, and then to a boxy word processor that was in turn superseded by a laptop that barely outweighed the hardbacks of the books she typed on it. But she'd left the laptop in Oxford. Something about autobiography made the idea of her fingers tripping across pre-established letters appear abhorrently easy, glib. If she was going to sound the depths of memory, it would be slowly, with each word a physical act, shaped by her hand.

Longhand was the only means she could think of to navigate past the young woman who'd learnt typing at the secretarial school her parents had hoped would stifle her queer notions of independence. Longhand seemed the truest route back to the Anne who'd filled notebook after notebook with a succession of stories that had, at first, been no more than dreams and fantasies, then more closely resembled her reality, as if both her imagination and the world were drawing slowly together, like the face that came to meet her whenever she moved towards a mirror.

She'd been trying to recapture that Anne – vain idealistic energetic – since she got here, but every sentence carried with it the nagging doubt that her memory was deceiving her. There were times her younger self seemed too good to be true, a construct like all the other past manifestations of herself she intended to resurrect: the disciple of free love, the dissatisfied wife, the feminist struggler, the divorced mother, the Greenham Common protestor, the newspaper polemicist, the mildly celebrated author, the occasional TV pundit. Taken together, these past selves served as convenient staging posts for a narrative of female self-realisation. But they were all radically divorced from the woman she believed herself to be today.

For what connected the woman who'd delighted in the pill and its sexual freedom to the one that popped her thyroxin tablets instead, a prisoner of age and faulty hormones? Or the woman who'd defended women's rights to abortion to the woman who rescued a photograph of her grandchildren with a tear threatening



stupidly in the corner of her eye? Or the woman who'd chained herself to the Greenham fences to the woman who leaned against the doorframe and shivered apprehensively as she looked out over the retreat?

The storm had obviously delivered far more than the gentle rain that had pitter-pattered her to sleep. Vegetation thickly mossed the swimming pool. Dead birds sprawled like offerings at the base of lightning scorched trees. Fallen branches lay entwined and entangled in some elaborate child's puzzle. The storm had done all this, but it hadn't blown her door open. The frame was undamaged. The key remained in the lock, where she clearly remembered having turned it twice before getting into bed.

Anne ran her hands over the cool, varnished wood of the doorframe: it betrayed no weakness, no flaw, nothing to suggest she hadn't opened the door herself. Her fingers tightened around the frame, anchoring herself to it against the swell of terror that threatened to drown her. She knew what had happened, knew why she'd felt tired ever since she arrived here, knew the dampness of her nightdress couldn't be from sweat alone. She was a sleepwalker again. Dirt and grassblades speckled her feet, simultaneously real and vestiges of her passage through dreams.

She slammed the door and locked it. Sobs gurgled up from her throat as she moved back into the room, slumped onto the couch and cradled her head in her hands. The only time she'd sleepwalked previously was when her thyroid problems had first begun. Something about coming here had made her ill again. A whole vista of renewed tests opened up before her horrified imagination. Phials of blood sucked from her arm. Pinpricks in her earlobe. An ultrasound whose quarry was cancer, not a foetus.

She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands. She just wanted to go

home. She just wanted to forget she'd ever been here. She just wanted to believe the book wasn't a mistake, a parasite sucking the energy from her, the life.

The pile of pages she'd collected from the floor sat on the coffee table but she couldn't bring herself to look at them. Every page carried the burden of grief. Grief for the dead friends and relatives she couldn't write back to life. Grief for the fading powers of imagination that had pushed her into writing memoir in the first place. Grief for the hope she used to have, the belief that things had been worth fighting for, back when nobody knew the prize of the struggle with publishers would be chicklit in glitzy pink covers, solipsistic bulletins from comfy lesbianism, and Clarissa's derivative crime fiction that didn't even have the courage to make its detective female.

Anne could have screamed with frustration, but even her anger felt useless: a vain pride before death, a desperate clinging to the idea that her life could make any difference. She took a deep breath and willed herself to calm down. Like the grass between her toes, something about her despair seemed slightly unreal, the ghost of a troubled night. She would have a shower and tidy the room before breakfast. Order and routine would salvage the day.

But the bathroom light failed to respond when she flicked the old-fashioned metal switch. Her desk lamp clicked on and off redundantly too. Had the power cut lasted all night?

She stepped over to the window to see if there were any signs of power visible elsewhere but the windows of the other chalets remained hidden behind shutters. She was about to turn back to her room when a door opened. Marc emerged from a rectangle of darkness, confirming the power cut was still general. Anne assumed he was about to set off on one of his jogs until her eyes moved down his frame to inspect his wiry legs and she saw he wasn't wearing shorts. He

was wearing ripped jeans caked thickly in mud, as if he'd been dragged through a farmyard.

Anne retreated into the shadows of her room. She knew whose chalet it was even before Clarissa stepped out onto the porch wearing nothing more than a fluffy pink bathrobe. After quickly scanning the surroundings for onlookers, Clarissa kissed Marc. A look of longing flashed between them, then Clarissa said something Anne couldn't hear, waved and closed the door. Marc disappeared from the tableau vivant of the window as swiftly as he'd appeared, but Anne had already registered everything.

There was a childish innocence in their obvious desire for the affair to remain undiscovered. And there was a quiet delight in Anne's unexpected knowledge of it. She smiled and moved back to the darkened bathroom, her footsteps and her mood equally lightened by this stolen secret.

## 6: The inescapable self

TED'S PANTED BREATH roared in his ears. His pulse thrummed along his veins, his heart a drum pounding out the animal rhythm of his life.

The twitching undergrowth fell still at his approach. Birds erupted skywards in a clatter of wings. Fallen branches cracked beneath his lumbering tread.

He'd spent the night stumbling bewildered through the storm, but daylight offered no relief. He was lost in the forest, a walking catalogue of misfortune. Leaves, mud and mulch stuck wetly to his flimsy shirt and trousers, and his attempts to brush them off had only smeared them deep into the fabric, an indelible camouflage. His bones nursed a frozen core. His jaw trembled with the cold. His spine ached beneath its new burden. His eyes were no longer capable of seeing straight ahead. And most worryingly, his brain functioned only sporadically. There were moments when he felt fully in control, believed himself still capable of somehow rescuing the situation; other times he came to in a place with no memory of how he'd arrived there.

He remembered an iron bar clanging to the street. He remembered the waiter's look of terror. He remembered the kaleidoscopic swirl of a striped umbrella tumbling down a boulevard, light sparking from each of its metal spindles. But then he could recall nothing until the unease that had gripped him as he'd stepped out of the final halo of streetlight, into the streets of the power outage. The darkness had felt alive, eager to envelop him. He'd retreated to the doorway of a department store to wait for the first glimmerings of dawn, watched over by the mannequins who showed no shock at his new appearance. He didn't know how long he'd stayed there. It could have been two hours or two minutes. It ended with

the snap and snarl of a pack of wild dogs that bayed at him as if the storm raging above were his fault.

Ted remembered the weight of a dog's snout smashing into his thigh, and the sharp teeth that tore at his ankles, and the final dog that crouched, primed to leap toward his neck, its eyes and fur irradiating a fierce, unnatural light. And then a blank.

Nothing. No recollection of stepping out of the doorway. No recollection of beating a path to safety. No recollection of how he came to be loping exhaustedly through the forest at dawn, his hands stained with rust that proved, on closer inspection, to be dried blood.

He'd long been used to the way that writing could swallow time: you lived five minutes in your imagination, only for a look at the clock to reveal it had been two hours of your actual life. But this felt more insidious. It was as if he now shared his head with something else, a sinister lodger intent on slowly displacing him from his own consciousness, leaving him to clutch only at fragments and wonder what lay hidden in the gaps.

In an attempt to stave off another mysterious fugue, he repeatedly told himself who he was. But his thick tongue struggled to pronounce the litany of names he'd catalogued the previous night. They felt unreal, figments of an imagined life. Here in the forest, the memory of his name on book spines was as fanciful as the hope that he'd somehow stumble across State Hunting Lodge #1, slip into bed and wake up fully healed, newly transfigured to his old self.

Taxied everywhere since his arrival, he'd considered the road that linked the retreat to the city as little more than a short, private driveway. But to Ted's despair, reaching the huddle of sad, low, weather-beaten chalets was proving tougher than

he'd ever imagined. He'd lacked all idea of scale, failed to register the vastness of the surrounding forest where he was now lost: half-man, half-beast, hungry, tired and painfully thirsty.

A deep well of self-pity opened up within him. He imagined the other writers waking up in their chalets: safe; warm; thrilled that only three days remained before they could return home.

*Home.* The word carried wistful images of Herman and Emily tucked away in bed, reminded him of how, asleep, the ghosts of their younger, more innocent selves reclaimed their teenage faces. He thought of how anger would distort Charlotte's dreams and leave her desperate to seek vengeance from the day. And then he thought of Erika. Impossibly, a new life was growing inside her, perhaps already forcing her to find new positions for sleep, or stirring her into dreams of what was yet to come.

Ted felt unexpectedly tender towards both women. His rage of last night had passed. He knew it was no longer a question of lawyers. He'd happily sign away his every brass nickel to college funds and alimony, accept the familial parody of weekend visitation rights and sleep celibate forever in a studio with a pull-out sofa bed if it meant a return to something approaching normal. He genuinely wanted to be the Ted the lawyers or Charlotte or Erika's asshole father believed him to be. But he was hideous, monstrous, inhuman. He was beyond imagining, cursed. Normal no longer applied.

More in frustration than hope of effecting any change, Ted reached up once more to the horn that jutted from his snout. Steeling himself against the intense heat and the volts of electricity that juddered down his arms, he closed his fingers around the horn and yanked with all his might. He tugged and pulled until his skin blistered from the heat. Nothing moved.

Ted growled. He stepped backward, then lowered his head and charged towards the thick trunk of an oak. The jarring impact juddered down his spine. Debris showered down on him from the branches. A thick patch of bark splintered free and fell to the floor.

The horn remained wholly intact.

Undeterred, Ted backed up. He repeated the charge again and again, smashing his horn into the tree trunk in expectation of a splintering crack that would send the horn to the ground and release him anew from whatever sick enchantment it was that plagued him. The tree rippled with fleeing insects. Bark shredded with each impact. The horn dug deeper, scorched the wood. It grew more difficult to tear it free. His growl of rage swelled until it seemed to fill the whole forest, then fell silent.

He slumped to the base of the tree and wrapped his arms around it in a despairing embrace. There was nothing more he could do. His legs refused to carry him further. The fallen branches were a mattress, the leaves a comforting quilt. He didn't care about the cold and the damp. He could ignore the pain in his hands and the ache in his neck. None of it would matter when he was dead. Let someone or something find him, do with him what they would. He couldn't go any further.

His heavy limbs longed for rest. Ted made no attempt to resist. He couldn't, he was sure, move another inch if he tried. His senses no longer processed the world correctly. The air rippled as if from heat distortion. Everywhere he looked, points of light burnt brightly into his retina, as if the forest and the sky were on fire. An invisible creek babbled next to his ear, growing louder and louder as he laid on the ground and brought his heavy head to rest.

Water?! Startled to consciousness, Ted fleetingly perceived the rivulets of cold water that ran from his jaw and down

his shirt neck. Then, as if driven by a force outside him, his head rushed to meet its shadowy reflection in the creek's rippling surface.

There was no time for civilized niceties; no time for wondering what microbes or heavy metal traces might lurk within the water; no time for cupping a handful to check for impurities. This was consumption in its purest, most desperate form. Ted drank long and deep, his snout entirely submerged in the chilly water. Each time he raised his head and gasped for breath, his neck muscles were already driving his snout back to the water. The first liquid that had passed his lips since the beer he swigged the previous night, the earthy water was more welcome than champagne. Life flooded back into his limbs with each hurried mouthful. He gulped and guzzled it down until his stomach threatened to burst.

When he finally raised his head, he felt giddily drunk on the water. The forest slipped woozily past his vision, tilted at obscene angles, then slowly reacquired its customary axes, like a coin spun on a tabletop. Ted saw the creek he'd heard before sleep. Swollen by last night's storm, it babbled and chattered its way between low rocks, foamed and bubbled in inlets. A heron skimmed low over the surface. Its outstretched, curved wings formed an infinity symbol with their reflection on the water.

Baffled, Ted wracked his tired brain for something to explain his arrival at the water's edge. He knew he'd stretched out to sleep, perhaps to die. Yet somehow he'd moved, navigated his way to the creek and drunk, all in a moment that, again, remained hidden from memory. The uneasy sense that some other being was lurking in his consciousness resurfaced. Was he sharing his mind as well as his body with the rhinoceros? He quickly leaned forward and stared at his own pale reflection, as if he might catch unawares whatever it was that lurked within. The eyes gazed dully back at him. Brutish and opaque, they returned nothing more than



his stare.

Ted examined the reflected head more closely. The horn remained unscathed after the assault on the oak. It glowed steadily with a blue light that was still discernible in the dawn, though the pale nimbus that continued to flicker around the edges of his profile was visible in the water only when he moved his head and the displaced light blurred briefly before resettling.

Ted squatted on the ground and raised his hands before his eyes. They still bore the same burden of warts and cracks, still bristled with light, but Ted wondered whether their transformation was complete. Where only minutes earlier the skin had blistered painfully from touching the horn, the flesh was now soft and grey, like pads of felt on his fingers, and entirely pain-free. And whether as a result of the lingering cold or some other reason, his fingertips now curled arthritically towards one another, as if they cradled an invisible object between them, or yearned to become hoofs.

The inspection over for now, Ted let his hands fall to the floor and yawned deeply. The phantom taste of frying sausages brushed tantalisingly across his tongue, then disappeared so quickly that Ted was almost sure it had been an illusion. Nevertheless, he raised his head and carefully sniffed the forest air. Somewhere, meat was sizzling in fat. Unsolicited, a memory of seeing the creek before came to him. Was this the same strip of water he'd glimpsed snaking beyond the perimeter of the retreat? Perhaps he hadn't been wandering lost after all. The routes were already written across the land. All he had to do was follow.

Ted took one more drink and rose to his feet, reinvigorated by the icy water. Only a slight stoop as he loped along the side of the creek betrayed any lingering tiredness. The morning sun had made the forest a striated world of light and dark, cool and warmth. Each movement through the sun's warming rays was a

temptation to pause, raise his face and absorb the solar energy, feel life slowly bubble back to the surface of his skin. But he didn't stop. Hunger gnawed at him so acutely that he never considered what he'd do when he saw the others. All he could think of was food.

Scents that had initially been faint below the smell of damp vegetation grew stronger as Ted neared the retreat. With the epicure's discernment his new snout had given him, he detected toasting bread, bacon, the caramel char of slow-fried onions, a soft bloom of coffee. The intoxicating aromas called forth childhood memories of standing on the street in the warm eddies of the draught from a diner's extractor fan and how the heat turned the air to rippling water. But when the creek brought him to the top of a slope, the panorama that opened up below him was not the streets of his childhood but a deep amphitheatre hollowed out of the forest floor.

Joyously, through the mesh of trees Ted saw the chalets fanned out just as he remembered. He still had no plan, no idea, but the night had stripped him of all patience. If there were a path to the retreat, Ted didn't bother searching it out. Instead, he began to scramble down the incline in loafers designed only for sidewalks. His feet slipped and slithered over the wet ground. He struggled to contain his growing momentum. He discovered his heavy head had irrevocably transformed his relation to gravity: its mass constantly threatened to pitch him somersaulting forward. Stopping was out of the question. His years of skiing were all that kept him upright: he flexed his knees to absorb the impact as he skidded over tree roots; he tilted his body against the slope; he even managed a short hopping leap to avoid a rock glimpsed at the last moment.

He still had the technique. Unfortunately, he lacked the equipment to match. His feet weren't skis; his arms refused to sprout poles. The moment he saw the

bush speeding towards him, he knew hitting it was unavoidable. Briars tore at his shirt, his pants, his flesh. Fabric ripped with a dull, wet thwack. Shredded leaves filled his mouth. His feet abandoned the ground. The sky was both above and below him. And then he stopped.

After his failed attempt to shatter the horn, Ted was unsurprised to find nothing broken. The bush had actually arrested his fall. Equally trapped and supported by the thorny branches, he hovered above the retreat, his arms helplessly outstretched, an Icarus frozen mid-plummet. He was, he reckoned, about fifteen feet above the rooftops. High enough to see the devastation the storm had wreaked; near enough to the clanking pots in the canteen not to care. He thumped to the ground after a brief, frenzied struggle that left his tattered shirt still stuck on the spiked branches. Scratches crisscrossed his bare chest and secreted tiny pearls of blood as he descended the final yards towards the perimeter fence.

His steps grew cautious now. Instinct told him to pick his way slowly from tree to tree and resist the urge to blunder his way through the main gate. With his watch lost at some untraceable point last night, Ted couldn't be sure if the others would still be in their chalets or already at breakfast, but he didn't want to meet anyone right now. He just wanted to eat and then to sleep. He just wanted to feel human again.

By stealing his way through the cool shade and scrambling over fallen trees, he soon reached a break in the fence. The green wire that sagged between two posts was no red carpet, but it was all the invitation Ted needed. It sunk below his weight as he stepped across into the retreat, then sprang back into place as he leapt to the ground, quivering as lightly as if he'd been no greater weight than a bird on a branch.

He strained his eyes to detect the barest flicker of shadow in the watery light,

sniffed the air for signs of life beneath the overpowering smell of food and listened closely for any murmur of voices. He detected nothing. All the movement in the retreat emanated from the canteen. The cushions that festooned the trees were the only observers of the stealthy arc he traced around the back of the chalets. Close enough now to savour the fat in the air, he began to fear the others were already finishing breakfast, devouring whatever portion should have been left for him. But then he was at the rear of the canteen, crouching behind the stacked gas canisters. Rats scurried for cover beneath the toppled trashcans. His feet kicked discarded cabbage hearts and ground eggshells into the earth. And first his nose, and then his eyes confirmed he was in luck.

As the noise of cutlery being slapped down onto tables echoed from the canteen, Ted peeked through the open door into the deserted kitchen. Food lay on the zinc top in readiness for removal to the buffet bar. A plateful of bacon glistened in the light from the doorway, alongside stainless steel containers of fluffy scrambled eggs and freshly fried sausages whose skin was seared with dark lines of burnt flesh. Thick drool trickled from the corner of his mouth and dripped to the floor as he stepped over the threshold.

He stepped back. Footsteps approached. An unseen door swung open. Ted pressed his body to the wall and watched in agony a pair of hands remove the container of scrambled eggs. The promised feast threatened to vanish before his eyes.

Ted calculated he had about twenty seconds. As soon as he heard the door swing open and shut, he stepped through the doorway and pinched sausages with the clumsy fingers of both hands. The lingering coating of grease scorched his felted blisters anew, but Ted would happily have juggled burning coals to assuage his hunger. A starburst of scalding fat exploded over his tongue as he snuffled his

way through the first sausage. He ignored the pain and rammed the next one into his mouth before he'd finished swallowing. He scrabbled in the pan for more, but the sausages came alive beneath his touch. Nothing would stay where he wanted it. The sausages slithered and darted between his groping fingers, while the voice that shouted from the canteen sounded as if it was directly behind the connecting door.

Abandoning the sausages to their fate, Ted clumsily scooped up a few strips of bacon between his two hands and ran back into the daylight. Like a dog with a fresh bone, he carried his hoard to a private spot at the rear of the next chalet, away from the jealous rats and the curses from the canteen, before he allowed his teeth to tear through the salty flesh and yank at the thin strips of hot fat. His tongue clacked with satisfaction as he ate. In that moment, he could forget about his transformed head and his weary legs and the painful scratches across his chest. There was nothing more pressing than the need to ensure not a single drop of grease fell to the ground unintercepted.

The meal was so deliriously absorbing that he hardly noticed Anne at first. She was a vague shape at the edges of perception. Her khaki dress merged with the background, made her for a moment one more tree in the forest around them. But this tree moved. This tree gasped with fright. This tree, when Ted raised his head and looked, transformed into the unmistakable shape of Anne. One hand moved to her mouth, the other moved towards her face for protection; neither was quick enough to mask her appalled horror.

Ted was doomed to misinterpretation. His every attempt to communicate came out wrong. The mouthful of bacon distorted his attempt to say *Don't worry* into an animal groan, a snort of frustration, a growl. When he tried to match Anne's scream with his own wail of frustration, it emerged as a bellow of rage. When he raised his hand to calm her, it was quicker than he'd intended and became a

warning swipe, a defence of territory. His skin radiated an angry light. And when Anne began shrieking for help, something flicked in Ted's head. All night he'd longed to return here, idly supposing that sleep and food might save him. Anne's face told him neither would offer salvation now.

He couldn't stay here. It didn't matter that Anne was already backing away. He backed away too. Fear reflected fear. As one stumbled, the other did too. As one turned to run, so did the other. The distance between them doubled as steadily as in a mirror until, finally, the bond was broken: Anne disappeared around the corner of the building and sprinted towards her chalet; Ted fled the retreat, certain that people would already be running to their doors in answer to Anne's shrieks.

A flickering blur, Ted passed the chalets, trampolined off the depression in the tumbledown fence and scrambled up the incline. He didn't look back as he crested the hill. He splashed through the creek and disappeared into the shadows of the trees, back into the forest.

## **7: An inspector calls**

FULLY DRESSED, ANNE cowered in the bathtub, trembling beneath the dripping showerhead. She'd been there for almost an hour. Her joints burnt with the enforced contortion but she refused to move. She was trying to be invisible behind the translucent shower curtain. She was trying not to exist. Any movement would be sound; sound would, she was sure, bring the monster; and the monster, the insatiable, ineradicable, invincible monster, would bring death.

It was a terrible chain of logic that repeated itself ceaselessly. She hadn't recognised Ted, only seen him. To Anne, Ted was a monstrous, snarling apparition who'd leered towards her, flesh spewing from its maw. She'd been too terrified to notice his retreat. In her mind's eye, she saw him always advancing towards her instead, glowing with rage, a creature who'd stolen in from nightmares she couldn't recall.

She was convinced the creature had been real. She could still picture its flickering light, still catch a faint trace of its dank, earthy scent, like a house that had been abandoned to mould. The unease that had haunted her since arrival now made sense: what she'd thought was a return of her illness had been a foreboding, a secret intimation of something so terrible her subconscious had made a somnambulist bid to escape. Something awful had happened in the storm. Its energy had revitalised ancient monsters, brought Ovid's nightmare creatures to life. He'd died here but his stories had somehow lived on, trapped in the mosaics at the bottom of the pool.

Exhausted and confused, but terrified above all, she could think of no other explanation. It didn't matter that she'd seen only one. Terror escalated their ranks

in her head until she pictured an entire mutant bestiary stirring in the forest. Wave after wave would advance from the trees, a dystopian army insistent on claiming reality their own.

Already the air was alive with shouts and grunts, unexplained shrieks and screeches. The noise drew ever closer, as if she alone were the chief target of the unseen monsters. She was convinced they'd be merciless. There was a price to pay, a debt for all the generations of writers who'd arrogantly believed they understood the world and could shape it as they wished. And in her heart, she knew she was as guilty as anyone. Only an hour ago she'd been ignoring the contours of reality, planning to manipulate her experience to better fit the confines of the page. An hour ago, she'd have dismissed all talk of monsters as fantasy and nothing more. But an hour ago she'd blithely assumed she was safe.

Anne lived in a different time now. She shivered and waited for the heavy thud against the door, the splinter of wood and glass, the terrible fumbling at the lock. Unexplained slivers of light flashed past the window, swift as angels.

She never expected a light rap of knuckles and the sound of her own name. Fear had so heightened her senses that she heard the voice as if it were coming from within the bathroom. It called into her ear with such intimacy that Anne yelped in shock. Amplified by the tiles, the yelp echoed incriminatingly around the bathroom, bouncing and rebounding off the walls like a ball she had no hope of catching. Then she heard her name again.

—Anne? You in there? Anne?

—Marc?

—Anne? Marc called. He knocked again. Anne?

Somehow, he hadn't heard her. The bath groaned beneath her as she struggled to her feet. All her muscles had gone to sleep. Her heart was a scurrying



insect chasing over her ribs. She tottered to the door like a marionette, fighting against invisible strings that tugged clumsily at her hands as they groped for the bolt. She lurched into the room and saw the silhouette beyond the door turn to leave. No one knew she was here. She was back under the old curse, invisible to everyone but the monster. She tried to call out, but her throat constricted as if she were allergic to the air itself.

—Marc, she wheezed. Marc! Is that you?

The silhouette paused, then turned back, a rippling shadow behind the frosted glass.

—If it's not me, it's someone doing a very good impression, he said.

Air flooded back into Anne's lungs. Her insect heart grew still. Guilty tears started at the corners of her eyes for the way she'd spied on him and Clarissa earlier. She jerked her way to the door and fumbled the key into the lock.

Just to be outside again, to see someone, was overwhelming. She slumped against the doorframe, powerless to stop the cold sweat running down her forehead or her mouth from twisting into the lopsided grin of a stroke victim. She expected Marc to launch into some explanation or update, but he stared at her instead. For a moment, he looked at her as if *she* were the monster.

—Are you alright, Anne?

—I am, yes. But what about everyone else?

—They're fine as far as I know, Marc said. I mean, I haven't been able to get hold of Ted, but the others are all on their way over to the canteen now.

—The canteen? she said incredulously. What are they going there for?

—Luca asked me to tell everyone. Apparently the police are here. They want to see everyone in the canteen in ten minutes' time.

—The police. Thank God.

Marc looked at her. His face clouded with puzzlement.

—Are you sure you're alright, Anne? We didn't see you at breakfast and, well, you look a bit pale.

His concern struck Anne as preposterous. What did he think? That she'd mixed herself a martini and watched everything from the veranda? Angry words fizzed to her lips, then popped into nothingness as she looked around her. The world was a puzzle she couldn't solve. An army of workmen who'd inexplicably sprung forth from the earth were chainsawing through the fallen tree that blocked the entrance, drilling into walls, hammering at fence posts. The canteen staff were dragging garden furniture free of the tangle of tubular legs and arms. The long shadows of the trees cast thick bands of darkness across the grounds. There was no group of haggard, world-weary survivors. The only limbs that littered the floor were fallen branches. The cries that filled the air were the mournful caws of the seagulls above the pool.

—Anne?

Looking back at Marc, she noticed he'd replaced his filthy jeans with shorts unmarked by blood or mud. His hands were empty of any rudimentary weapons and his tanned face was remarkably calm. He waited for her answer as if nothing had happened. As if the world had never changed.

—I'm fine, she stammered. What were you saying about the police?

—Apparently we don't have any choice. They want us all over in the canteen right now. It's a pain in the backside when you're trying to write, but fingers crossed it won't be long. I'll see you over there.

Anne still didn't understand what was going on. But when Marc turned to leave, the dread that rose within her was instantly recognisable. Blinding light flared in the space where he'd just stood. The doorframe felt spongy, incapable of

bearing her weight.

—Marc? she called.

He turned back.

—Would you mind waiting a second while I grab my stuff? I hate being the last one to turn up to these things. It makes me feel like I'm on stage. I mean, unless they need you there this minute.

—No, he said, I'll wait.

The blinding light faded. The world grew solid again. In the bathroom, she splashed her face with the tepid, brownish water. She glanced towards the shower curtain hemmed with black mould as she looked for a towel. It was ridiculous to think it could have concealed her. But what had there been to hide from? She looked in the mirror in search of an answer. Her reflection dizzied her, threatened an infinite loss of the self. She felt oddly disembodied, simultaneously substance and air. Perhaps there were no monsters more threatening than the woodlice patrolling the perimeter of the window. Perhaps the protection she needed was from herself.

It had been six years now since she'd first developed hypothyroidism. Six years since she'd endured three months of frequent pursuit by ghosts who'd disappear the moment she turned to confront them. Six years since she'd wake in the night to see shards of glass floating above her. Six years since she collapsed on her bed one afternoon and felt her existence concentrate into the tip of a fingernail and hang there, inviting her to brush it off. The doctors had taken three months to diagnose the problem, but the daily thyroxin had stopped the visions and the fatalism immediately, a magic pill. With the distance of time, they'd become a quietly treasured memory of the initial illness, a sign of how little she'd been herself. She'd never thought they'd return, but looking back at Marc standing cool

and untroubled in the doorway, she felt certain they had.

—Come on then, she said. Mustn't keep the police waiting any longer.

Marc grinned and fell into step beside her. However much she'd been irritated over the last three weeks by the deliberate, showy way he stretched on his veranda before and after every run – as if the point of exercise was for everyone at the retreat, or at least Clarissa, to see the virtuous effort writ large in sweat patches across his chest and back – there was no one at the retreat Anne would have preferred as an escort now. Not Ted with his bargain-basement Hemingway swagger. Not Patrick with his hearing aid and permanent whisky breath. Not Clarissa and her fragile beauty. Marc and his wiry, lanky frame would do very nicely.

She had to resist the urge to hold his arm. She walked as close to him as she dared, feigning interest in the inane chatter he tried to strike up. The forest loomed around them, timeless; the once familiar world of technology and instant communication hidden beyond it, almost unimaginable. She scanned the trees for patches of light that might take on flesh. Nothing moved. The world was a corrective to her fancy. The bright sunlight bleached the memory of the monster, left the colours of its flickering skin so faded it was impossible to believe it had ever been real.

Inside the canteen the shadows of the half-open shutters striated the walls and the ranked death heads of the hunting trophies. The tables had been pushed aside and the chairs placed in a row in the middle of the room. Clarissa's eyes darted over them both as they entered, then returned to the man sitting against the windowsill, who tutted at this late arrival. Patrick glanced down at his watch and yawned. There was no trace of monsters. The only threat here was of bureaucracy stealing the rest of the morning.

Anne sat next to Marc, so grateful for his escort and continued presence that she tried not to notice his leg graze Clarissa's. The ghost of fried meat on the air reminded her she hadn't eaten breakfast, but in an attempt to ignore the sudden pangs of hunger she trained her attention on the scowling figure at the front.

Luca introduced him as Inspector Decebal from the Constanța police. In his late-forties, he wore a shabby, parchment-coloured, polyester suit marked with an archipelago of coffee and ketchup stains. The suit clung to him like a garment that had been bought in happier, leaner times. Combined with the shadowy grease that rinded the once-white collar of his shirt and made it indistinguishable from his dark stubble, it gave the eerie impression that he'd worn these clothes so long they were now slowly fusing with his flesh.

Nevertheless, when he stepped forwards to address them, he exuded a subtle authority. Like all the writers, Anne had sometimes felt at public readings that the person on stage wasn't really her, that the audience granted her power her words failed to warrant. Decebal betrayed no such misgivings. He clearly believed power was his by right. It infused his every move, made his smallest gesture simultaneously threatening and mesmerising. Anne couldn't look at Luca as he translated Decebal's smoke-gravelled greetings; she watched Decebal's unmoving mouth and the eyes that flickered from face to face instead, as if Luca were a ventriloquist's dummy and Decebal his consummate master, throwing his voice into each of the writers' heads.

—Inspector Decebal says please not to worry, Luca said. He is not going to shoot anybody yet.

The joke fell flat but Decebal remained unperturbed. Where most people would have smiled in an attempt to invite complicity, he lifted his chin slightly and peered down his nose at them all, making them doubt it had been a joke in the first

place.

—He is talking about the storm last night. He says it was very bad in Constanța also. It is many years since a storm like this. There was a power cut there. Most people stayed at home. But some people went to a bar.

Anne wondered what this was all about. As the adrenaline of the morning dissipated, the familiar fog of drowsiness began to descend in its place. Decebal's voice was strangely lulling, a deep rumble she felt in her chest. When she blinked, her eyelids struggled to reopen. Her head tugged against the invisible cord that maintained it upright. Her mouth opened in a wide yawn, then froze. Decebal had pointed a stubby finger at her; its grimy fingernail twitched while Luca translated.

—He says people in a bar saw one of the famous writers. They say he had much to drink. He was very nervous, not friendly. So he wants to know where were you last night.

That insect heart was back. Her lungs burnt. Her mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Her body felt drained of all power. She didn't realise until Marc spoke that he was Decebal's real target. His bare thighs scratched across the rigid plastic of the chair as he squirmed beside her. He stammered that he'd been in his chalet, listening to music.

Decebal was transformed, a bloodhound on the scent. It wasn't clear if he understood Marc's words, or was even interested. He barked over Luca's translation and jabbed his finger at Patrick instead.

Patrick sat dumbstruck. There was no sign of his usual aggression, his ability to take offence at anything. He groaned with what sounded like fear. A small purple and green bruise on his left temple made him look like he'd already suffered a violent interrogation.

—What the hell is this about?

The question took them all by surprise, including Anne. She'd thought the words and snapped them out involuntarily. Everyone turned towards her. The workers' noise outside seemed to fade. Four pairs of eyes pleaded with her for deliverance. Decebal glared at her, but the spell had been broken. Breath eased back into her lungs. Anne saw Decebal for what he was: a petty bureaucrat in an ill-fitting suit. After her encounter with the monster this morning, whether real or imagined, it was a relief to face up to a more familiar foe. This kind of bullying might have gone down well with the Securitate or whoever he used to work for but it wasn't going to work now. Things had changed.

—We appear to be on trial for something, she said, but we don't know what it is. Surely it's not a crime to be unfriendly, even in Constanța.

—Ms Carroll, Luca said, I am sure Inspector Decebal is not accusing you. Something happened last night in the town and he thinks it might be connect to someone here.

—And I'm sure we'd all be more than happy to help with his enquiries. But this isn't Moscow. There's no need to turn it into a show trial.

Luca started to reply, but Anne cut him off: —Can you translate that, please, Luca?

Reluctantly, Luca turned to Decebal. There was a brief exchange in Romanian during which Decebal glared steadily at her. When Luca turned back to the writers, Decebal sneered at her, clearly eager to ensure she understood the full worthlessness of the apology Luca translated.

—He says sorry he did not tell you everything. Last night this writer in the bar did not pay for the drinks. He says you writers have many money. It is very rude not to pay, no?

—But how do they know it was one of us? Clarissa asked, perhaps

emboldened by Anne's elevation to public enemy number one.

When Luca translated Decebal's answer, it was difficult to know how much was accurate and how much the result of obsequiousness learnt at tourism school. He said that people in Constanța were proud of their hospitality to writers. He said it was hard to believe that someone as famous as a writer had done this. He was prepared to think it was a mistake. But somebody had left the bar without paying for the drinks.

—But all of us were here last night, Anne said.

—Ted wasn't, Marc said. And he wasn't in his chalet either.

—That's right, Patrick said. He probably thought it was on the house. Left them a signed photo or something. You have been visited by an American legend.

They all laughed more than the joke warranted, willing their faces into smiles, an advert for a carefree life. Decebal waited for them to finish, this moment of forced joy his final gift. When he spoke again, the colour drained from Luca's face.

—He says the writer was American.

—There you see. He'd

And before he left the bar, he was

violence. He fight with the waiter.

—Ted? Anne said. Are they sure it was Ted?

Luca didn't answer. Decebal was already speaking again. When he stopped, Luca looked at him in silence.

—What's he saying, Luca? Anne said. What is it?

Luca turned back to them slowly.

—He says after the fight, the writer went to the street. People in the bar did not see what did happen next. It was very rainy, very dark. The storm was very



bad. The waiter went to the street too.

Here he paused and glanced at Decebal, but it was clear the translation wasn't finished. Decebal waved at him angrily. Luca turned to face the writers again, as pale and trembling as a suicide on a precipice. Anne felt Decebal's eyes search out her own. She stared at Luca instead, willing him to finish the story.

—The waiter did not return for a long time, he said. The people found him later. Luca looked once more towards Decebal in search of release, but there was still something more. His voice sounded as if he were trying not to choke. The waiter was dead. And the writer was not there.

Anne turned to Decebal. She opened her mouth to speak but air wouldn't enter. Light flickered around Decebal's profile. His sneering face echoed the monster's snarl. The room tilted and listed at impossible angles like the deck of a ship in a storm. The hunting trophies bulged towards her from the walls, the air hot as breath on her face. She gripped her chair but it was already tipping towards the floor. Lights swarmed before her eyes, then swallowed her in darkness.

## **8: In the prison camp**

THE MOOD SHIFTED from holiday to prison camp. Innocence counted for nothing. It was impossible not to feel under suspicion.

After Decebal had eventually accepted that neither Patrick nor Marc fitted the description he had, Marc returned to his chalet to find two virtually identical figures emerging. Tall and well-built with close-cropped hair, their leather jackets creaked as they barged past him. They muttered something that might have been Police, then laughed as if this were a private joke.

Inside, Marc found his typescript pages scattered across the floor, his painstaking emendations overridden by muddy bootprints. His dictionary and thesaurus gaped open at the ceiling like accident victims waiting for deliverance, their long-scarred spines now fatally cracked. His clothes lay crumpled and strewn in various states of distress: a shirt reached out a forlorn arm; odd socks clung together; his filthy jeans lay on the floor with their legs cocked, as if shot down halfway through a despairing escape attempt. He considered complaining to Luca, then realised it would be pointless. The police had made no attempt to conceal the search, as though they were actively inviting protests from the writers; under their perverse logic, only those with something to hide would object.

The search had probably lasted less than five minutes, but it took Marc the best part of half an hour to set things straight again. When he sat at his desk, he flicked through the stacked and yellowed pages and tried to recompose himself. The final draft of his novel was almost complete. He'd edited 239 pages of the 358 he'd brought with him and was confident it was better for the changes. Unlike previous drafts, when he'd cut an odd sentence here and there and changed the

occasional word, in this one he'd transformed the text. He'd mercilessly excised a character, and rather than regret the time and effort he'd devoted to creating her in the first place, he found it deeply satisfying. Getting rid felt like something a more experienced writer would do, a creative destruction. But as he looked over the changes he'd made the previous day, he struggled to reconnect with the story. The words looked for a moment like they'd been written by someone else.

Talking to Clarissa the previous night, he'd felt re-energised, ready to grasp success whether Ted and Patrick supplied words for the back cover or not. Such energy was beyond him now. He was too distracted by memories of the previous night, by the sight of Anne emerging pale from the temporary sickroom of the canteen and hurrying to her chalet like a vampire terrified of the sunlight, by the listless policemen who loitered outside Ted's chalet like actors waiting for instruction, sweat patches slowly colonising their powder blue shirts. In the course of a night, the ramshackle retreat had acquired the texture of a novel. An unruly hybrid of genres in which statues briefly spasmed into life and Ted was falsely (?) accused of murder but had no way of proving his innocence, where Anne fainted like a character in a Victorian melodrama, and Clarissa and himself edged into romance. Only Patrick appeared unscathed, but other genres could still claim him. A visitation by aliens. A haunted hearing aid.

There were stories everywhere, but none were the one he'd come here to write for himself in which a quote from Ted or Patrick would provide the passport to a wider readership. And looking at the dull and lifeless words before him, Marc wondered if that long-cherished story weren't the most fantastical of them all.

In grey London he would have gone for a run, a change of scenery to revivify the scenes in his mind. But running in this heat would have been suicidal, and the angry graze on his thigh still burnt dully, untouched by Clarissa's miracle cream.

He thought about reading, but the police had artfully managed to conceal his copy of Ovid somewhere. When he picked up one of the novels he was due to review, his mind refused to engage. The words were just shapes on the page. They looked like English but might as well have been in Latin or Romanian. It was as if Ted were a totemic god of creative energies; without him at the retreat, there would be no work.

Defeated for now, Marc went over to the bed and lit a cigarette. He wanted to clear his head, but tiredness and a half-empty stomach conspired to strip away his years of smoking experience. The nicotine rushed to his brain in the kind of dizzying surge he'd last suffered as a teenager. Worried he was about to mimic Anne's fainting fit, he gripped the wooden bedframe until the initial rush passed, then reached over for an ashtray that he balanced carefully on his chest before resettling his head on the pillow and taking a longer, deeper drag. He promised himself he'd start writing as soon as he'd finished the cig. For now, he wanted to lose himself in the smoke, let the gaping, dizzying emptiness swallow his consciousness and all his worries, leave him with a clear run at the page.

His mind didn't cooperate. The sudden breathlessness stirred memories of being underwater. Glowing faces swam before his eyes. An invisible weight tugged at his body. He felt himself sinking inexorably into the mattress.

—Working hard?

The voice startled him. The ashtray clattered to the floor as he shook off the invisible weight and sat up. But still he squinted at the figure in the doorway as if she too might be a vision. She held a bottle of what looked like Bombay Sapphire in her hand. Its blue glass glowed in the sunlight behind it.

—Clarissa?

—Isn't it a bit nineteen seventies to be smoking in bed still?

—It's this place. You spend too long here and you end up going back in time.

—That sounds like a line you could use at the debate.

—I was thinking more of the police. They make the Met look progressive. I came back here and they'd been searching my room. No attempt to hide it. My stuff was all over the place.

—I know. Mine too.

—Have you said anything to Luca about it?

—No. I thought I'd leave it to Anne or Patrick. They're much scarier than me, she said, giggling.

—I don't know about that. They won't want Inspector Magpie giving them the hard word.

Her laughter stopped as abruptly as it had started: —Very funny, she said.

—Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it, he said, stubbing his cigarette out on the base of the upturned ashtray. Do you want to come in?

—Are you sure that's allowed?

Marc remembered the unyielding page he'd been staring at earlier.

—Course it is. Decebal said we couldn't leave the retreat. He didn't say anything about solitary confinement.

—I didn't mean the police, she said. She closed the door behind her and nodded towards his typescript, awkward and angular on the desk, I was more worried about disturbing the *Meisterwerk*. I wouldn't want to get in the way of serious literature.

—Didn't they teach you anything at Oxford? There's no such thing as serious literature any more. Books are just books.

—Try telling that to the others. I'm sure they'd be horrified to hear *Inspector Magpie* mentioned in the same breath as their stuff.

Marc watched her move into the chalet. He tried to remember the touch of her body, the faint perfume on her skin, but her presence rendered his memories insubstantial as ghosts. Her blonde hair blurred into a radiant corona. Sunlight filtered through her thin summer skirt to make a diaphanous trapezium of flowered cotton.

—Maybe you shouldn't worry so much about what they think. Maybe neither of us should.

—That's easier said than done, she said, standing before the window and fingering the hem of the curtain.

—If you come over here, we can always give it a try.

—What about your work? I really don't want to disturb you.

—I think the police have already beaten you to it.

Clarissa paused for a moment, then tugged the curtains shut behind her. Marc shuffled across the bed, already anticipating the feel of her body next to his. He watched her walk towards him. Framed by the morning sun that filtered through the curtains' faded blue fabric, the edges of her body glowed slightly, as if light nestled beneath the skin.

## 9: Burning

TED RAN FOR what felt like hours. The soles of his feet and every tendon in his legs burnt with the extra effort of carrying his oversized head, but he couldn't stop. Anne's screams had told him everything he needed to know about his hideousness. In the bar the previous night, he'd only imagined himself an outsider, a reject; now he was abhorrent, a creature beyond saving, outside of language. Any words he tried to utter in his defence would be drowned out by horrified screams, silenced by bullets. He had to get away.

But when he reached the forest edge and came to a standstill beneath the shade of the last trees, he found none of the relief he'd hoped for. It was no longer a question of whom he was fleeing; now it was a question of where he was headed.

Accident or instinct had led him away from both the retreat and the city. Instead of the crumbling grey apartment blocks he'd been driven past the night before, he stared out over an unbroken swathe of rape that stretched to where a tractor tugged a plume of dust along a distant ridge.

Ted crouched in the shadow of the trees, waiting for the tractor to inch further along the horizon. When he moved out of the shade, the midday sun felt unnaturally hot on his skin. The rape seethed and hissed beneath a wind he couldn't feel. The yellow petals glowed white hot, their edges smouldering and charring, filling the air with sweet incense. Every stalk seemed to bend and press towards him, like pilgrims clustering around a long-awaited icon. He felt suffocated, smothered. Choking on the smoke, it was all he could do to turn back and hurry away from the crop that now crackled with flames, into the forest that had never looked so safe or so much like home.

## 10: Promise

LUNCH THAT DAY was delivered to the chalets: rubbery hard-boiled eggs, sandwiches soggy with poorly drained pickles, and plums whose overripe flesh bore the imprint of several fingers. By the time Clarissa returned to her chalet, her portion was long warm from the sun. Nevertheless, she found herself wolfing it down, her appetite restored for food, for life.

It had been eight months since she'd ended things with Philip. Eight months since she'd realised she could no longer live with a man who, even during sex, maintained the distracted, faraway look in his eyes of someone desperate to keep an appointment elsewhere. Eight months since nearly four years of her life had been reduced to the soft click of a lock and a closed door that stared back at her blankly.

In those eight months she'd almost forgotten what it was like to see herself wanted in someone else's eyes and feel fingers press her flesh as though they'd mine beneath and bring a newly glowing self to light. Of course she knew it wouldn't last forever. She'd probably felt the same giddy enthusiasm with Philip once. But knowing that made her all the more determined to embrace it while she could. Besides, anything was preferable to another afternoon wrestling with *Magpie*.

Yet when she finished lunch and returned outside in the white bikini she'd changed into, she half-considered retreating to her desk. They'd agreed to go for a swim after lunch, but she hadn't expected Marc to be waiting for her to emerge. He stood on his veranda with the half emptied gin bottle in one hand and two glasses pinched between the fingers of the other, naked but for tight-fitting trunks. His



skin and his smile glowed in the afternoon sun like a radiant advert for their private debauchery. Whatever had been theirs before lunch now threatened to be everyone's.

The workmen had all left and Patrick and Anne's shutters were down, but still they were observed. The policeman outside Ted's chalet squinted steadily at her through a fog of cigarette smoke, while the German shepherd at his feet gave a soft whine of interest and raised its head from the cradle of its front paws as Marc walked towards her. The glasses clinked together like a bell announcing the start of a performance, but there was still time for her to turn back to her chalet if she wanted to. Instead, she found herself moving down onto the spiky grass with that same sense of inevitability she'd felt the previous night, as though her actions were not her own, scripted elsewhere. She glanced at the closed shutters and, despite her initial misgivings, turned back to Marc and smiled.

He stopped a few feet away from her and grimaced. The breeze idly lifted stray leaves from around his feet.

—Are you sure about this? he said.

—About what? she said, trying to keep her voice level. She looked down at the gin bottle and wondered if he'd come across to return it and nothing more.

—Going swimming. Have you seen the state of the pool?

She followed Marc's gaze down the slope. Although the chairs and sunloungers had been disentangled and returned to their normal positions at the head of the pool, leaf mulch still furred the surface of the water green and brown except for where the breeze had opened piebald gaps. A slight shiver ran through her, indecipherable. It could have been the rising breeze, or foreboding, a warning they were about to be discovered. When she turned back to Marc his face was scrunched into a silent plea, as if he were secretly afraid of the pool.

—What are you scared of? she teased. The wet leaves or the monsters in the water?

He didn't laugh. He said: —I was more concerned about the grazes on my legs.

—They'll be alright. There's so much chlorine in there it's probably the cleanest place in the retreat. You won't catch anything you haven't already got from the canteen.

—But won't this make it a bit obvious?

—Make what obvious? she said.

He stepped towards her and lowered his voice: —I thought you wanted to keep this quiet.

—For godsake Marc, I'm talking about going for a swim, not inviting everyone to watch you boff me in the pool, she hissed, though her resolve to enter the rippling water faded as she spoke. She wondered what the two of them were doing out there, by the pool, in Romania, hiding from real life. Swimming itself had never been the point. It had been a way to escape *Magpie*, a way to discover whether Marc's interest in her extended beyond her body. His earlier advice not to worry about what the others thought had felt right at the time, but now she worried he'd only said it to get her into bed. She'd been too quick to accept him as an ally, had never stopped to ask what made him right and the others wrong.

—I'm not talking about boffing you, Marc began, but in the moment he paused a door creaked open behind them and decided everything.

—Come on, she said, and set off running down the damp slope, laughing, her momentum gathering with each step, threatening to lift her clear of the ground.

A warning cry rose in Marc's throat but Clarissa was already diving towards the pool. Her bikini white against her tanned skin like the markings of an exotic

bird, she appeared to hover in the air, as though time had slowed to calibrate itself precisely to the contours of her body, and then she plunged through the surface in a fountain of leaves and water, sound and light.

Marc turned to see Patrick regarding him with sleep-puffed eyes.

—Not writing then? Patrick said.

Marc blushed. He began to mumble an excuse but Patrick cut him off.

—I don't suppose anyone's said anything about whether or not the power's coming back on?

—Not to me, no.

—It's bloody ridiculous, isn't it? They can find a generator for the office but not one for us. How are you supposed to work without your laptop? Or a fan?

Marc grunted agreement. He felt the gin bottle and glasses tug lightly at his arms. Despite the misgivings he'd felt about his work in the morning, there seemed no better moment to offer Patrick a drink and capitalise on this sudden inclusion in a conversation about writing. He turned more fully towards Patrick and raised the bottle in his hand. Patrick didn't appear to notice. He was squinting past him, down towards the pool.

—Looks like you're wanted down there.

Marc looked back to the pool. Clarissa had resurfaced. With her body hidden beneath the foliage, Marc had the uncanny sensation her severed head alone had bobbed back to the surface. He remembered with a shudder the hands he'd imagined tugging at him after he'd fallen in, the faces melting into light. But then she raised an arm streaked ochre and green with decaying leaves and struck off towards the end of the pool.

—Not joining her? Patrick said.

—What? Erm, I don't know, I was—

—You might as well. If you can't do any writing, there's not much point sitting around, is there?

—No, Marc said, then immediately regretted it. His words were forcing him away from this, his best chance yet. Patrick was already turning back to his chalet when Marc added: —Unless you fancy a quick drink or something.

Patrick turned back and stared at him. Gulls circled overhead, their slow, mournful caws drowning out the thrum of the generator. The moment stretched uncomfortably, pressing Marc beneath the full weight of his idiotic ambition.

—No, it's alright, Patrick eventually said. It's a rule of mine never to have gin before four. Besides, I wouldn't want to spoil your fun.

—It's okay. I can do without a swim, Marc said, glancing down towards the pool. Clarissa was now swimming breaststroke. Her face was set into a scowl as if he'd already let her down. She didn't know how desperate he was, how ready to debase himself for that quote. She was probably only one more book or TV adaptation away from having her own pool; Marc wasn't even certain they'd publish his next book. They could just as easily leave him to sink into anonymity, one more lost without a trace.

Patrick wasn't interested.

—Seriously, go swim. I'm sure you did enough sitting around last night, in the storm.

—Kind of.

—But if it's the same tonight, there's no point doing the same. Not if we can't write at any rate. We should get together. You know, have some wine or something.

—Really?

—Of course. I didn't come here to sit on my own in the dark.

—No, I mean, that'd be great, Marc said, and turned away before Patrick had chance to change his mind. He felt like running with joy. He had to concentrate to pick his way down the slope and not repeat his tumble of the previous night. His senses were oddly heightened, the world too much to take in. He could see the faint ghosts Clarissa's feet had left on the grass. The air was cooler against his skin, smelt vaguely sweet with decay. He heard the low slop of waves over the rim of the pool and their empty gurgle down the drain. He looked back up the slope. Patrick, the policeman and the dog had disappeared from view; only the lifeless eyes of the statues watched him as he clunked the bottle and glasses onto a table.

Clarissa swam towards him, her scowl of moments before now vanished. She looked up to the empty rim and turned back to him and smiled.

—Come on in, it's lovely, she said, but though Marc moved towards her, he was secretly obeying a different command. It was Patrick who'd told him to come here. The pool, the light, the sun on his skin all felt part of a promise of something more. The concrete thudded beneath his bare feet as he pounded along the pool's edge, but he felt weightless as he

leapt into

the air

and bombed into the water.

His feet narrowly missed Clarissa's head. They tore through the carpet of leaves and sent up a mushroom cloud of rotting leaves, dead insects and stray cigarette ends. Marc saw nothing. He was underwater, gasping in agony at the

jarring impact with the mosaic floor. Filthy water flooded into his lungs and sent him coughing and spluttering to the surface.

—Whoa! Are you alright? she asked

The sun and the viscous pool water in his eyes blinded him. He turned towards the sound of Clarissa's voice, but the snort of her barely contained laughter seemed to come from all directions at once, a mocking echo beneath the slap of his hands on the water. Then her arms were around him, warm, secure, patient.

—Yeah, he said, then burst into another coughing fit.

—Everything okay? Nothing wounded except your pride? she asked when it had subsided.

He broke away from her grasp and offered her a weak smile.

—You could have warned me I was jumping into the paddling end.

—I just assumed it was a kamikaze run, she said, and in the contagion of her smile, his anger was forgotten. Their laughter coalesced and merged, until they forgot its original source and were laughing only for the joy of the shared moment; until they no longer knew where one voice ended and the other began.

## 11: State of denial

MARC AND CLARISSA'S laughter drifted up from the amphitheatre around the swimming pool to where Patrick stood yawning on the veranda. He blinked into the sun, raised his arms and stretched, then looked back at the open door of his chalet with a forced casualness. An empty parallelogram of light fell brightly from the doorway across the tiled floor. Everything beyond its edges lay hidden in shadow. Peering over his glasses, he studied the slab of sunlight for signs of life, the dread shadow of a cockroach rearing from the floor. Nothing moved. There was no reason to be out here, with the itch of the sun on the back of his neck and his scalp crawling with the feet of invisible insects. The chalets remained without power, but he could still write. He had paper, a pen, daylight. Marc and Clarissa were young. They had time to waste even if they didn't have the talent. Patrick was old and he had his daily target of words to meet, swollen by the debt carried over of the ones he'd lost in the storm.

He told himself this was the moment to write, hoping the words alone would goad him into action. A long afternoon nap had restored valuable energy. His mind was sharp before the dulling wine he'd have with dinner, and his body recovered but for the insistent pain in his thigh. And while Ted's disappearance and the descent of the police on the retreat might have unsettled the others, Patrick found himself welcoming their questions. Like iron rungs fixed in a cliff face, they gave him a way to slowly scale back to reality. Anne could keep her moral outrage. The police were nothing to be afraid of. It was officialdom. It was life. It was the nurse handing you the papers to sign when your hand shook so much you could barely hold the pen.

The police had to have a suspect, assume someone was guilty. It was their job, no more than a mild affront to the moral universe. The fact a writer was the suspect didn't make it any worse. And Patrick had seen enough of Ted to doubt he'd get worked up or faint if the roles were reversed. Ted would be Ted. He'd disappear into his chalet and go through the familiar motions, like he'd done every day since their arrival and like he probably did even at Christmas. Ted had that assurance about him, that resolve that Patrick had always aspired to but never quite attained. Ted's wife could have cancer or his kid be lying broken in a hospital bed and he'd still write, so this supposed murder wouldn't disturb the routine either. Ted would write. He'd see the bored policeman and dog as one further layer of protection against the interruptions of the world. Had a cockroach invaded his desk, he wouldn't have run. He'd have swotted it aside with a huge, animal fist or dismissed it as nothing more than a creature of his imagination.

But Ted was Ted, and Patrick was Patrick. And Patrick couldn't bring himself to go back into the chalet. He had neither appetite for lying on the bed and chasing after sleep nor the courage to return to the desk. He was wary of being alone with his imagination. Once his strength, it had now become an intimate enemy. Thanks to his imagination, he was convinced the Goya postcards had shifted subtly while he slept, so the witches and the devils looked out of the painting more directly than he'd remembered. Their expectant faces disquieted him, as though they were waiting for something to happen in the room, the space of their nightmarish visions now his.

Marc and Clarissa's laughter floated up to him once more. Despite the throbbing pain in his thigh, Patrick hobbled to the edge of the veranda and looked down for a moment at their heads floating above the scum of leaves. The languid ease of their movements and the flash of their teeth in the sun alienated him. They



were remote as a world glimpsed on TV. He felt so isolated that, for a moment, he questioned the wisdom of postponing Marc's offer of a drink. He could have been with him now, in the chalet, in the protective cocoon of company, but instead he'd trusted his instinctive hunch that if the cockroach returned, it would do so in darkness. Night would be the time to take advantage of Marc's sycophancy. Let him yearn after Clarissa all he wanted this afternoon; he'd be Patrick's permanent escort this evening.

But that still left the problem of what to do until then. The pewter clouds in the distance offered only a faint portent of relief from the oppressive humidity. He couldn't stand out here in the sun and wait for them to break. He'd go mad, like some washed-up Conradian exile. He looked back to the open door of his chalet but couldn't move towards it. He'd go mad.

Beneath the lazy stare of the policeman, Patrick winced against the pain in his thigh and picked his way across to the administration block. The generator's filthy reek of hot diesel cast a pall over his sense of smell that lingered as he stepped into the unexpected cool of the office. There were no signs of the privations the power cut had inflicted on the writers here. Fans whirred noisily on the floor and the filing cabinets. Fluorescent tubes hummed in the ceiling despite the sunlight that sliced through the blinds and cast pale shadows over the hunting trophies that, like those in the canteen, leered from the walls with oppressive solidity, as if death were integral to the structure of the buildings, an intimate part of the state. An electric typewriter clacked briefly, familiarly, then fell silent.

—Mr Rayner? Can I help?

A young woman with the thin, rapacious face of an eagle stared at him from Luca's desk. He'd never seen her before but her voice sounded exactly like Luca's. She looked him up and down in an assessment as peremptory as the nod of her

head that Patrick only understood was an instruction to turn around when he heard Luca's voice again from the side.

Luca sat at a small desk against the picture wall that had been papered with images of a forest glade. Sun-faded wildflowers swarmed towards his feet. An outsized bee hovered over a stack of papers, an insect monk bent in study.

—Please, do not worry. I lend my desk to Inspector Bacovia for the moment. She speaks very good English, he said. Patrick glanced back and saw Bacovia grin coldly at this information.

—She has come to help. In case there is a problem with Mr Nowakow, Luca continued, pronouncing Ted's surname with a deliberateness that tore it free of its American rhythms and emphasised its ethnic origins instead, introduced a stress Patrick had never heard from Ted.

—Still no news, then?

—No, we have no news.

—Aren't you worried?

—I am sure the police will find him. They always find criminals, Luca said, glancing nervously towards Bacovia, as if fearful his previous obsequiousness towards Ted might somehow incriminate him still. Can I help you, Mr Rayner?

—I was actually coming to ask if you've got any insect spray I could have.

—Insect spray?

—You know, in an aerosol, to kill insects.

—I know what is insect spray, Mr Rayner. But why do you need it?

Patrick snorted briefly.

—For the insects, why do you think?

—But there are no insects here.

—What?

—Maybe some small flies, or bees for the flowers, but not insects you need to kill. The birds will eat them. Wave your hand, they go away, he said, flapping at the air as if he were already dismissing Patrick.

—But I've seen cockroaches in my room.

—Cockroaches? There are no cockroaches here. You see it every day. This is a very clean retreat. We make sure there is nothing bad.

—I've had cockroaches in my room. The size of my fist. The size of—

—Like William Burroughs.

—What? Patrick asked, turning to Bacovia.

—Like William Burroughs, she said. *The Naked Lunch*. I see the film many years ago. It was famous after the revolution. Insects. A very special typewriter.

Hunching over the typewriter before her, Bacovia waved her fingers in the air like antennae and rasped *Mr Rayner* in a gravelly voice, a childish imitation of horror, before collapsing into self-satisfied laughter that Luca rapidly echoed, an eager conspirator.

—I don't care about William Bloody Burroughs, Patrick said. I just want some insecticide.

—We do not have any, Luca said, controlling his laughter. There are not any insects.

—And I suppose there are no rats near the canteen either. I'm telling you, I've had cockroaches in my room. Massive ones.

—I am sorry, Mr Rayner, Luca said, his cheek twitching with the effort to render his face solemn, But what do you want me to do? There are no cockroaches. It is all your imagination.

—I thought you were supposed to be here to help us.

—I am. But I can only help with the things that exist, he said, a fugitive

smirk darting across his lips. Perhaps, like the people in the film, you have too much insect spray already.

The slammed door barely muffled their laughter. As Patrick walked angrily away the image of their grinning faces floated before his vision: the heads of grimacing colossi drunk on disbelief.

## 12: The masque of light

DEAD LEAVES TRAILED against Marc's shoulders as he swam to the end of the pool. He stopped when his fingers grazed the concrete rim, stood and looked up at the inverted arena of the sky above the amphitheatre. He felt the world around him expand. Distance reduced the gulls circling overhead to pencil lines, a child's shorthand for birds set against the billowing clouds that scudded across the sky in the gathering wind. Waves dark with leaves glided menacingly towards him and broke coldly across his chest.

—Are you ready? Clarissa called. She stood at the opposite end of the pool and held a glass of gin aloft as if toasting him. It sparkled and burnt with reflected sunlight, a torch to guide him across the Hellespont between them. She was at least twenty metres away, too far for him to have any real hope of swimming to her underwater. Yet that was the challenge he'd accepted.

All afternoon she'd slipped through his grasp, nimble as a nymph, every time he'd tried to touch her, until she'd grown so exasperated he was convinced she'd leave. But leaving would have been too simple. Clarissa was more devious. Even in her refusal to let him touch her in public, she'd found a way of challenging him to show his affection. It was like the way she'd come to his room in the morning, only for him to end up having to cajole her into sex. That they both knew he'd never manage to swim an entire length underwater whether he had three goes or twenty wasn't important. The minute she'd challenged him, he'd had no choice but to accept. The point wasn't to pass the test. The point was to make an attempt. Anything less now would be an affront.

He heard Clarissa call his name again but didn't answer. Breath was too

precious to waste. Plunging his head beneath the surface, Marc kicked off from the tiled wall and darted into the underwater world. This place that had been designed for sleazy Romanian politburo members to cavort with nubile apparatchicks now glowed with an unanticipated beauty. The mosaics lay hidden beneath a sludge of debris, but the sunlight that streamed through the gaps above formed glowing pillars in the murk, columns of light to hold the canopy of leaves above him. Despite his urgency to reach the other end, Marc slowed. He felt like an explorer who'd stumbled across a temple whose calm had lain undisturbed for centuries; he swam simultaneously in the past and the present, free of time.

The vision was fragile. With a subtle shift in the sunlight above, the columns disappeared in an instant. The murk closed around Marc, a seemingly impenetrable wall that robbed him of all sense of direction. The water felt strangely cold. Precious air bubbled out of his mouth as he looked around helplessly for light. He only realised he was sinking when his feet brushed the pool floor and the uncanny sense that something was trying to tug him down returned. He kicked himself free and rose gasping to the surface. The air rang with Clarissa's whooping laughter. Marc blinked the chlorine water out of his eyes and saw her still half a pool away, doubled over in exaggerated disbelief.

—What kind of effort do you call that?

—That, he gasped, was what you call reconnaissance. You won't be laughing this time.

The words rang hollow even as he said them. He turned without waiting for an answer and retraced his path to the end of the pool, gripped both by a new determination to actually succeed and a new wariness of what lay beneath the carpet of leaves. He wished he could save time by diving from the poolside, but whether through planning or unhappy circumstance, Clarissa was standing at the

deep end. The water where he stood was too shallow to risk a dive.

He stared back at Clarissa while he caught his breath. The sun shone through a gap in the gathering cloud and made the water a shifting floor of veins of shadow and sharply reflected light. Closing his eyes against the glare, Marc ducked under the surface and moved blindly out into the water. There was no sensation of peace or wonder this time. Retained air burnt against his cheeks. The water resisted his movement, forcing him upwards. He pushed downwards into the chill zone sunlight hadn't reached and stifled a shiver of apprehension as he felt his chest graze the tiles. Straining to stay at the pool bottom for as long as possible, he battled wearily against the water until, sooner than he could have believed possible, his fingertips brushed the wall.

Dazzling jewels of water and light fell around him as he tore through the surface and gulped in a burst of joyous breath. Once again, Clarissa sputtered with mocking laughter.

—What's the matter? Did your satnav break down or something?

Clarissa's voice wasn't where he expected. He turned and saw her standing about ten metres away. She was still at the end of the pool. He was at the side.

—Does the scenic route not count then?

—Afraid not, she said. Sorry.

Clarissa's joke mutated as Marc swam back. With each successive replaying in his mind, any intimacy was steadily dwarfed by the public school overtones he thought he heard in it: the Oxbridge larks, a whole history of being taught that the world was there primarily for your amusement. Her gushing laughter rang around his head like coins shucked into a till. Where his whole life had constantly been swimming against the tide, hers had been one where money and contacts parted the waters. And now she seemed to think he was hers to take and reject as and when

she chose. Her dirty secret. He was ready to get out and abandon her stupid game, but as he turned and looked over the water, he saw Clarissa raise the glass of gin and drain it in a premature but undisguised victory toast. His throat constricted with anger. No torch would guide him now; only the furious need to emerge from the water as the master.

The pool conspired with his desires. His body cut through the water as if through air. No pressure forced him to the surface, no chill fingers clawed at his tired muscles. The radiant columns of sunlight glowed like white hot metal, aspiring to become solid. This was not the blurred vision of earlier. This was a luminous cathedral, its every detail impossibly clear. The leaves above were an enormous vault of stained glass, their veins the delicate leading, while the shells of floating insects glittered like inset jewels.

Entranced, Marc began to slow, but his anger persisted. There was a task to fulfil, a point to prove. He pierced one of the columns of light and felt the sunlight gild his skin as a foreshadowing of her warm body beneath his. It was just a matter of passing from one column to the next. Already he was halfway across the length of the pool.

But as he pressed on, determined to emerge victorious, the luminant columns crumbled into the same phosphorescent motes that had effervesced from his body the night before. He slowed and looked around him, into the static of light. The intense pleasure of moments before disappeared. He felt himself sinking towards the pool bottom, following the grains of light that moved downwards like dust sucked towards an extractor fan. They left darkness in their wake, the velvety gloom of a cinema.

Marc glanced up from the dark water: bright sunlight still illumined the stained glass canopy of the leaves and formed glowing bosses in the gaps where the



columns had shone through. Confused, Marc lowered his head and looked directly before him. The phosphorescent static began to rise from the pool bottom in funnels of unearthly blue light, as if a multitude of TVs now played into the darkness from beneath the debris on the floor. Everywhere he looked more funnels of light sprang into existence. Within each one, the static coalesced into shapes that moved independently, breathed life. They were projections, each one a story that had lain trapped in the mosaics for years. Were these the faces he'd seen melting out of the darkness the night before?

A curious peace descended upon Marc. He forgot his wager with Clarissa completely and drifted slowly forwards over the pool bottom instead, inspecting this masque of light. A bull moved within the first funnel he passed. The flowers garlanding its horns swayed with each step. It walked towards Marc, then stopped and looked back in expectation. A young woman emerged from the static, her face shadowed in beauty, the current tugging her dress behind her like a breeze. The bull beckoned her forwards with a twitch of its enormous neck, but Marc was already distracted by the sound of music. He swam to the next funnel and saw Orpheus walking ahead of Eurydice, his neck muscles tensed with the effort not to turn around, but then the voice was drowned out by the drum of a stag's hoofs as it ran from funnel to funnel, pursued by a baying pack of hounds whose diffused edges trailed a stream of light.

Marc could feel his breath escaping, but he moved between the funnels of light, entranced. Time was lost, these figures eternal. A man chased two women who turned into birds as they ran. The Minotaur prowled the labyrinth of its immense solitude. Ariadne wove a glittering cloth, an image of a cupid so lifelike that Marc felt no surprise when it too began to move, plucked an arrow from its quiver and drew its bow. The final image he recognised was Narcissus staring into

a pool. His face, impossibly, was Marc's own. He swam towards the image, straining his eyes as if sight could explain what he saw.

A shadow moved above. A body smashed through the canopy of leaves and hit Marc hard in the back. Rude hands tugged at his armpits, yanked his struggling body upwards and pulled him through the water.

He was in the air once more. The hands released him. Water seeped into his mouth as he sank back beneath the surface, only for the unseen hands to grasp him again. They pulled upwards. Rough concrete scraped his back. Water fell from him. He opened his eyes and stared unblinkingly at the sky until the silhouette of Clarissa's head appeared and moved urgently towards him. Her lips closed around his, a kiss to return him to life. Air forced its way into his lungs and left him coughing and spluttering for life. He twisted his mouth free and raised himself onto an elbow, retched water onto the concrete rim then slumped back to the ground.

Clarissa's hand moved over his back as he stared out over the pool and up to the statues and the clouds gathering above them. Static danced before his eyes, slowly clearing to reveal the palette of his surroundings had shifted. The green of the grass and the blue of the sky and the disc of the sun were all different, their colours more intense than he'd ever known them, as if the vision beneath the water had transformed the world forever.

### **13: The limits of omniscience**

ACTIONS REPEATED. A pattern threatened to develop. For the second day in succession, the four writers emerged from their chalets into the humid evening and converged at the locked canteen door. Waiting for Luca, they avoided one another's gazes. They hunched their shoulders instead and glanced nervously upwards at the bruised and dirty sky or watched the columns of leaves that pursued one another across the grounds like forest spirits the skittish wind had set free.

After Luca arrived, they shuffled into the canteen, glad to escape the imminent rain, newly grateful for the cold glow of fluorescent light on their skin, the brief return to the modern. But at table, their conversation was as oddly stilted throughout the first course as it had been the previous night, shaped once more by their awareness of the empty chair in their midst, the space that became a presence for the second day in succession.

Only Anne had so far glimpsed Ted's new hybrid form, but his absence engendered its own hybrid, a curious, unstable mix of emotions. Genuine fears for his safety were tempered by guilty suspicions that he might, after all, have done it. Hopes that he'd breeze back through the gates and entertain them all with anecdotes of his crazy twenty-four hours in Constanța collided with their growing resentment of the disruption his disappearance had caused. Ted had made a suspect of everyone. Ted had made Anne faint. Ted had brought Bacovia here to sit at a separate table and observe them eating. If Ted were guilty, this retreat would haunt them forever. They'd no longer be an author in their own right, but an author who'd stayed at State Hunting Lodge #1 with the infamous writer-murderer-creative-writing-professor T. E. Nowakow. Though they had all, to varying

degrees, won life's lottery, matching reality to ambition and desire, Ted had won biggest. Now he threatened to lose not just his prize, but theirs too.

—So are we not going to say anything? Anne asked as the waitress cleared away the last of the bowls and their grainy residue of packet soup. Or are we just going to pretend it's all one big secret?

The other writers looked at her in a silence that threatened to stretch and envelop them all until Patrick spoke.

—Speak about what?

—Faux-naïveté really doesn't suit you, Patrick. You know exactly what I mean. Ted. The police. This absolute shambles of a retreat.

—Don't forget the debate.

—What, you think they're going to expect us to do that with Ted still missing? Clarissa said.

—They've got every right to expect it, Patrick said. It's called singing for your supper.

—But what about Ted? Anne said.

—Do you think he'd be this worried about one of us if the boot was on the other foot?

—That's not the point. We can't ignore the fact he's disappeared just because he didn't pay enough attention to us.

—He won't just have disappeared. The whole thing about going into Constanța to make a phonecall will have been a front, a way of getting out of the debate. He'll be holed up in some five-star hotel, watching cable TV and stuffing his fat face.

—So the police are here for nothing then?

—Come on, Anne, it's an old communist country, Patrick said, glancing

towards Bacovia. Police are everywhere. You've got to give them something to do. They're not really interested in us.

—But Ted's missing, she said. Somebody was murdered.

—According to them.

—What, you think they invented the dead waiter for something to keep themselves occupied?

—I didn't say that.

—So in that case somebody must have killed the waiter. And how do we know it wasn't Ted? Of course I hope he didn't, but we can't assume he's innocent just because he's one of us.

—You were defending him this morning.

—Yes, but that was this morning. The longer he goes without showing his face, the harder it gets to believe he's got nothing to hide.

—But all we've got to go on is what the police have said. We're writers. We all know just saying something isn't enough to make it true.

—Thanks, Patrick, but spare us the mock profundities, please, Anne snapped. That's one thing I don't miss about Ted not being here.

—But that's how the police operate here. It's how anyone with a bit of power operates. Whatever they say becomes the truth. I went to see Luca before dinner to get some insect spray, but he claimed I didn't need any. He told me there are no insects.

—What? There are flies everywhere, Clarissa said

—And not just flies either. But if they say there aren't any, then what you see with your own eyes doesn't matter. The insects never existed.

—I still don't see what this has to do with Ted, Anne said.

—What this has to do with Ted, Anne, is this: nobody saw Ted kill this

waiter. They only saw them fight. Just because a bunch of drunks in a bar swear blind he's the murderer and the police mark him down as public enemy number one doesn't mean he's guilty. It's just words, Patrick said as the waitress arrived with the next course. But words don't make it real. It's like you can say this is food until you're blue in the face, but that doesn't mean you want to eat it.

—Yeah, what is this stuff? Clarissa asked, trailing her fork through the gloopy, bright yellow sauce dotted with green. It looked like a child's drawing of food, the colours too vivid, synthetic. The smell of curdled milk hung thickly over the table.

—It's instant pasta, Marc said.

—It's what? Patrick said.

—Instant pasta, Marc repeated, looking down at his plate.

—Instant pasta? That's ridiculous. Even I can cook pasta.

—It's more like packet soup, Marc said. A light blush spread across his cheeks as he explained: You put in milk and it comes out with the sauce already on it. This looks like it's cheese and broccoli.

—It might do if you've never seen either cheese or broccoli, Anne said.

—It's like some kind of food from the future, Patrick said. Everything instant. Everyone moving too fast to worry about taste. Or the smell.

—Better living through chemistry? Clarissa said.

—Exactly. They probably think we eat this all the time. Take a food tablet and look at a picture of a burger on the way to work, Patrick said, his face breaking into an uncustomary grin. It's why communism fell. They watched the films and the adverts, but they could never work out how we did it.

—So communism fell because they didn't have Smash? Clarissa said.

—Nobody ever told them the robots weren't real, Patrick said.

—Maybe the scientists were too busy training puppies to run with toilet paper, Clarissa said.

—Or doing the Pepsi challenge, Marc said.

—Or forgetting that Ted's still missing, Anne said over the rising laughter.

A more familiar scowl returned to Patrick's face.

—A minute ago you were saying he might be guilty, now you're saying we need to help him.

Anne ignored him. She turned to Clarissa and said: —What do you think we should do?

—Me? How should I know?

—You are the crime writer here.

Clarissa blushed.

—That doesn't mean I know anything about crime in Romania.

—But you must have some idea.

Clarissa's cheeks flushed a darker, angrier red.

—I'm sorry, Anne, she said, but if I wrote science fiction would you be coming to me for advice if aliens invaded? Or asking me how to deal with monsters just because I wrote horror?

Anne clattered her fork to the table and stood up.

—Fine. If nobody wants to be serious about this, I'm off to bed.

—O come on, Anne, Marc began.

—Don't you dare *O come on* me. I'm sick of this place. I'm sick of the food, I'm sick of the weather, and I'm sick of the way everyone acts like it's one big holiday camp. I want to go home.

—Well why don't you then? Patrick said.

—If I could get a signal long enough to call a bloody taxi, I would. Then I

wouldn't have to sit round here and pretend everything's okay. Pretend nobody's been murdered and that it's alright to do nothing.

—What do you want us to do? We don't know where Ted is or what he's done, Patrick said. We're not bloody omniscient.

His final words were lost in the slam of the door. The writers fell silent. Each desultory click of cutlery against a plate was uncomfortably loud. Rain skittered across the roof like grit. They didn't need to look up from their plates to know that Bacovia's steady gaze was upon them, waiting to see who spoke next, who left.

It was Clarissa.

—Not waiting for dessert? Marc asked as she pushed away her plate and stood to leave.

—No. I don't really fancy anything more from a packet. Synthetic strawberry won't go very well on top of all the powdered onion.

—We can't interest you in another drink? Patrick said. This wine's not from a packet. And besides, it sounds like there's going to be another storm.

—Thanks, but I'll leave you two to the port and cigars, Clarissa said. You can have a man's talk. You never know, it might even tempt Ted out of hiding.

They all laughed, glad for the momentary diffusion of tension, for the confused look that clouded Bacovia's face.

Marc watched her exit into the iodine yellow air. He turned back to Patrick and smiled awkwardly, as if they were on a blind date. Patrick pushed a freshly refilled glass of wine towards him.

—You're not in any rush to leave, are you?

—You don't want to do any reading while there's still daylight?

—What for? The debate? Patrick said. He flicked a hand dismissively at the air before him. What's it going to be? A bunch of university students and



housewives. They won't be interested in Ovid. You could make the stories up and they wouldn't know any difference.

—You think so?

—Of course. It'll be the same as anywhere else. You do a reading and all people want to ask you is how they can get an agent. They think signing a book for them means you'll read their work. You must have had that by now.

The waitress returned before Marc could reply. She thrust dessert before each of them with a fierce crack of ceramic on wood. A bright pink mousse – virtually indistinguishable from the previous night's carp roe – trembled in the bowls.

Marc leaned towards Patrick.

—But do you think we'll still have to sing for our suppers if Ted's still missing?

They both glanced across at Bacovia, then looked back at each other

—Who knows? It might help them sell tickets. What can you say about Ovid? The stories were already ancient when he wrote them.

—But do you really think Ted might have killed the waiter?

Patrick shrugged.

—Whether he did or he didn't, there's not much we can do about it, he said, then took a long swig of wine.

—But shouldn't we be doing something?

—Like what? Ted can look after himself. If he has done something, he'll already have the best lawyers in New York proving he didn't. And to be honest, even if Ted is guilty, I couldn't give a toss as long as Decebal doesn't make us stay after the debate. I'm starting to climb the walls here. I want to go home and have a proper pint.

—Me too.

—Really? I thought you might have wanted to stay here a bit longer. You could go swimming with Clarissa every afternoon.

—That was just today, Marc said, his cheeks flushing again. Neither of us could do any work.

—No one's judging you for going after her. She's a beautiful young woman. Shame her writing doesn't match, but you can't have everything. Sorry, I know, I shouldn't say that to you. You're not in a position to comment.

—Well, it's just that—

—So you didn't manage to get any writing done today?

—No, Marc said after a pause. Maybe I should go and do some now.

—Don't be daft. Nobody ever writes anything worthwhile after dinner. The mind's asleep. Stay here and have some more wine. Tell me about your book, he said, ignoring the wine that slopped onto his fingertips as he nudged Marc's wineglass further towards him.

—It's a bit complex. I don't know if I can boil it down into twenty words.

—I'm a writer, not a bloody agent, Patrick said, leaning back into his chair. Do your worst. I'm not in any rush.

Marc took a drink. The fluorescent lights clicked off and plunged his face into a yellowy-gray shadow. When he moved the glass away, the wine left a dark, ghastly smile curling upwards at the ends of his lips.

—Looks like it could be time to make a move, Marc said.

—We could just stay here and finish the wine, Patrick said.

—Not after last night and the power cut. I popped out of my chalet for a minute and couldn't find my way back. It was pitch black.

—So you had no power in your place either?

—I thought no one in the whole retreat did.

—No, no. I was just checking. But with the power gone there's even less reason to try write. You didn't come here to slave away by candlelight like some eminent Victorian.

—No, Marc said, though his voice still betrayed some internal doubt.

—Let's just take the wine back to my chalet and finish it there. I've got some other sniffers we could have once we've finished this. Here. Grab the glasses and I'll bring the candle and the wine.

—But how will I get back to my chalet in the dark?

Patrick stared at him with mock bemusement.

—I see your place every time I look up from the desk. You walk down the steps and go straight ahead. It's impossible to get lost. Come on. Let's do it now before the rain gets any worse.

—And you really want to hear about my book?

—What do you want, a contract? I've said I do, isn't that enough?

—OK then.

—That's the spirit.

—You don't want any of the dessert?

Patrick glanced at the untouched pink dollops slowly liquefying in the bowls, shadowy blisters that oozed a bloody serum.

—I think I'll leave it, actually. Who knows? If Ted comes back in the night, he might feel a bit peckish.

Marc laughed. They stood to leave the table and nodded farewells that Bacovia studiously ignored. As the two of them stepped out into the rain, the first distant flash of lightning hurled their shadows back into the canteen and racing up the walls: a momentary vision of men's bodies fused with the heads of beasts.

## 14: The meaning of language

CERTAIN COMBINATIONS OF adjective and noun had formed part of Ted's vocabulary so long that their coupling was virtually instinctive: freezing cold and baking heat; glowering sky and biting wind; prickly branches and fetid mud; buzzing insects and screeching birds; splitting headache and aching limbs. For years he'd used them uncritically. Today he'd learnt their true meanings, as if coming abroad had forced him to confront his language and learn it anew. But now he wanted the lesson to end.

After he'd retreated from the field of smouldering rape, he'd resurfaced from another fugue at the foot of a tree. The breeze murmured through the branches above him and the creek chattered in the near distance, but they could tell him nothing. They offered no clue how long he'd lain there or how he'd travelled so much deeper into the forest. Since then the fugues had come and gone all day, a series of blackouts that reduced his existence to a crudely edited videotape. Each fugue was preceded by strangely burning points of light around him, but learning to recognise this warning sign had done nothing to stave off the blankness. In his moments of consciousness, he found himself studying his body for cuts and marks, messages from his other self. There were none he could grasp. He could only guess at the fugues' length, only trust that they'd somehow contribute to his survival.

Yet when evening came and Ted emerged from the latest fugue to find himself standing at the top of the slope overlooking State Hunting Lodge #1, he feared his unconscious self was leading him into a trap. Remembering Anne's shrieks, he was ready to run from the retreat even before he spotted the fresh additions of a car with *POLITIA* emblazoned on the sides and the policeman and

German shepherd that squatted on his veranda.

He was sure the police were there for him. He was no longer a missing writer but a freak, a beast of a different order. The cracks running through his hands were still rusty with dried blood.

Ted turned, ready to melt back into the forest and put renewed distance between him and the retreat, but his stomach cramped as if squeezed by a giant fist. He bent over and clutched his gut, gasping. When the spasming eventually ceased, the easing of the pain was as intense as the pain itself: like resurfacing from a deep dive, it rendered the world new. Fresh details thudded into his reawakened consciousness. The gathering rain. The fading light. The crack and call of the undergrowth. The smell of food.

The sausages and bacon he'd snaffled down in the morning were the last meaningful thing he'd eaten. The hunger had become so insufferable he'd stripped leaves from branches and stuffed them in his dumb rhino mouth, only to find his taste buds were still human – his rhino teeth could only grind the leaves into a pulp even a Hare Krishna would have spat out. He had to eat something real. With pints of creek water sloshing emptily around his gut, just this faint smell of food was enough to make him ravenous. He imagined sneaking into the kitchen for the reward of a steaming pot of spaghetti bolognese or a tray of doughy, stringy pizza, but the sight of Anne leaving the canteen reminded him in an instant how fragile his freedom was. One scream was all it would take to bring the bullets flying. He had to be careful. He couldn't rely on dumb luck all day.

Smouldering with resentment, Ted watched Anne – fed, satisfied, ready for sleep beneath a sheltering roof – walk to her chalet. If anyone deserved to feel the full force of his incandescent fury, it was her. He swiped at the air like a shadow boxer. Perspective made his hand giant, able to crush her distant form in an instant.

But for all his anger and frustration, he believed he understood now why his unconscious self had led him here. The latest fugue hadn't been a trap after all. His animal self had obeyed instincts and followed the call of hunger, but it had also recognised the danger. Getting into the retreat unscathed was a task that required his patient genius. Where the animal would blunder in all rage and appetite, Ted would plot first and act later. However much the reason for his strange new existence remained a mystery, Ted already recognised that his survival depended on a symbiosis of brute strength and his own cunning.

Wary of repeating his earlier tumble down the slope, Ted passed slowly from tree to tree. He surveyed the retreat as he descended. Some of the chaos of the morning had been redressed but the fence still dipped where he'd leapt on it earlier. The depression was a fault in the fabric of the retreat, a portal that offered a passage back to a normality no longer his.

Halfway down the slope, he saw Clarissa leave the canteen. He pressed himself against the tree trunks but his caution was redundant. Like Anne before her, Clarissa headed for her chalet without a glance towards the trees. The policeman watched her to the door, then returned his gaze to the earth. It reminded Ted of watching passersby from the terrace of his Manhattan apartment: wave after wave surging down the sidewalk intent on groceries, appointments, beating the lights, never once looking upwards, Ted no realer for them than something in an invisible dimension.

The perimeter fence bent slightly beneath the press of his fingers. He stood, raised his snout to sniff the air and caught a strong waft of garlic. His glowing skin flickered briefly as the evening's first lightning bleached the sky above the treetops. A low, rumbling growl of consternation in his throat echoed the distant thunder. He heard voices approaching.

Ted retreated into the gloom beneath the trees. Marc and Patrick wandered into view in a gap between the chalets. Their words were a low murmur beneath the raindrops on the canopy of leaves above him. At the sight of the wine that spilled out of the glasses Marc carried, Ted had to stifle the cry that rose to his lips: a primal scream of envy and frustration and despair, it would have brought the police running in a flash.

They disappeared from view, swallowed by the concrete bulk of a chalet. Ted crept through the undergrowth and watched them reappear. The deep red wine dripped unheeded from Marc's fingers. They could afford to waste it when Patrick carried a full carafe. All Ted wanted was a mouthful. Food was every animal's concern; wine would be human, touching the divine. He thrust out his inky blue tongue and licked the air, as though the faint, vinegary traces of wine he smelt would miraculously transform to liquid on his tongue. It would soon be dark and he was confident he'd have the whole night to break into the canteen or, failing that, pick through the bins. But the idea of a sip of wine made him reckless. Abandoning his recent caution, he scampered through the undergrowth, tracking Marc and Patrick's progress around the pool.

Unaware of the creature now following them and the storm of hope raging in its head, Patrick and Marc walked on, disappearing and reappearing until they came to a halt, obscured behind Patrick's chalet. Ted heard the chink of glass against wood and the rattle of a key in a door. In his mind's eye, he could see the carafe on the veranda as clearly as if the chalet were transparent. He knew it would be unattended for an instant, forgotten in the British charade of politeness as they ushered one another in out of the rain. Ted felt his tongue thicken with desire. The temptation was too great. He gripped the top of the fence, ready to swing himself over.

Lightning saved him. A great, jagged bolt cleaved the dark air above the treetops and left Ted in no doubt over the source of his skin's earlier flickering. A double of the bolt above crackled down Ted's bare chest, a fissure of blinding light that opened for half a second, then burnt in afterglow on the retina.

Ted was already crouching beneath the trees when the chalet door clicked shut. Finally, he was ready to relinquish the absurd daydreams he'd nursed all day, of which the hope of somehow swiping the wine unnoticed by Patrick or Marc was the ludicrous climax. He might still have a chance of finding food, but that was all he could hope for. There would be no slipping into his chalet, no shower to wash off the grit and grime and leaves and mud and caked-on shit and dried sweat, no settling in for the night on the mattress and waking up the next day reconfigured. Whatever enchantment the storm had cast upon him, he could no longer doubt it was real. He was transformed, neither wholly man nor wholly beast. He was the lightning's mirror; his solitude infinite as the sky.

Determined now not to risk entering the retreat until total darkness fell, he turned back to the slope. Following Patrick and Marc had left him at the foot of the steepest part. It loomed above him like a trap designed to send his heavy body crashing noisily back to earth, so he turned and picked his way despondently towards a spot where he could climb to a safe vantage point and wait for the storm to fully conceal him. It wouldn't be long. The yellowish rain was intensifying steadily. The invisible shuttle of the wind wove the branches above him into a shifting fabric of light and dark. Tiny bolts of lightning, electric ghosts, flitted down his arms at the proximity of the storm that headed towards them in the gathering darkness.

Ted didn't expect anyone else to emerge from the canteen, but the door opened as he drew near. He froze at the sudden scent of powdered garlic, onion and



cheese that filled the air so strongly it seemed part of a deliberate plot to lure hungry beasts from the forest. He looked at the leaves around him, worrying that they'd begin to glow in presage of another fugue, his animal self too dumb to recognise a trap, but they remained shrouded in gloom.

Relieved, Ted crouched and watched Bacovia march across to the policeman on duty outside his chalet. Although she was a stranger to him, he felt instantly grateful to her when, after a brief look over the grounds, both she and the policeman disappeared inside, leaving the dog as the only sentry. From the direction of the kitchen, he heard pans clatter into the sink and voices call lazily to one another. The day was ending. There was no need to waste valuable energy scaling the slope again. All he had to do was be patient and trust his animal other wouldn't reassert itself before the need for cunning had passed.

But as Ted squatted beneath the trees, ready to wait for darkness, something caught his eye. The unmistakable yellow of candlelight glowed in one of the chalet windows. The fleshly blur of a naked body passed before it. A woman. There was no time to see who it was, but Ted recalled the layout of the chalets. It was Clarissa. He shivered with voyeuristic anticipation. The communist architects had left no greater concession to modesty in the chalets than flimsy net drapes that any illumination from within rendered transparent. Her self-indulgent candles would be as good as daylight. Life was more than this wretched survival after all.

Fractured memories of Erika and Charlotte and women who were now little more than a segment of breast or a sliver of leg jostled in his head as he padded towards the fence. His lips twisted into a leering smile. The sight of Clarissa in a bikini had been one of the consistent pleasures of the retreat. And now, until the canteen fell silent, her naked body would be his feast. She stood before a mirror, her back to Ted. For a moment he feared she'd seen him as she peered into its

depths, but steam fogged the window as he watched. Like tissue paper laid over an ancient map, it would protect her from his sullyng gaze. In turn, the mist of steam would obscure him from view, diffuse the flashing of his body into soft light.

Virtually on all fours in his freshly urgent desire not to be spotted, Ted lolloped back to the dip in the fence. He paused, raised his head, flexed his sore neck muscles and cautiously sniffed the air, then re-entered the retreat for the second time that day. There was no Anne to disturb him this time: her door was closed and her window dark as he hurried across the gap that would deliver him to Clarissa. He slowed. His shoulder brushed the damp concrete of Clarissa's chalet. With his footsteps inaudible beneath the drumming rain, Ted sidled up to her window and crouched down to peer over the sill.

He looked at an absence. There was no steamed blur of a back before the mirror. A chasm of frustration yawned open within him. He'd missed the show already, denied everything: not even the simple pleasure of another's body would be his. He bowed his head, as though this new burden of anguish weighed it down further, but the sound of a body entering water told him Clarissa was still nearby. He looked towards the bath: the condensation was too thick for any details to seep through. It wasn't Clarissa he saw; it was a soft, pink shape, a cartoon of nudity.

Abject, Ted slumped to the wet earth. It seemed the curse of his strange body wasn't enough; it had to extend to every cell of his being, every moment of his existence. A naked woman was no more than feet away and he couldn't see a thing.

He formed his lips into a glowing trumpet and raised his heavy head, ready to howl at the sky, but no noise escaped. There was a flaw in the screen of mist, a sliver of clear glass. An invisible current of air passed through the slipshod joinery and wiped all condensation from the base of the window. Ted seized upon it as a sign that the world wasn't entirely stacked against him. The flaw was tiny, but it

was all the space he needed.

Lightning flashed above the treetops and flickered across Ted's skin. He imagined its energy coursing through him, more powerful than anything food could provide. On all fours, he shuffled closer to the window. In his haste to see, he forgot his new self. His horn clattered against the wall. A chunk of concrete thudded incriminatingly into the grass. He tensed, his every sinew a wire searching for the smallest disturbance in the air. He raised his snout and scanned for signs of approach, listened for the click of a door or the pad of footsteps. Nothing moved. The only sound was the crack of hastening thunder.

Sharply reminded of the new length of his face, Ted shuffled back on his damp knees and squinted at the tantalising gap of air. He was at too straight an angle to receive any more reward than the burnt orange pedestal of the washbasin. The splash of water was coming from the right. So shifting his body parallel to the wall, he scuttled sideways and brought his left eye as close to the glass as he could. This time his reward was a clear, unimpeded view under the hem of the net drape all the way to where Clarissa reclined naked in the bath.

Unaware of the eye hungrily studying her every move, Clarissa smeared dreamy patterns of soap bubbles over skin gilded by candlelight, traced in soft foam the contours of her breasts, grinned to herself at some private amusement.

The sight was dazzling. For the first time that day, Ted felt fortunate to be alive. His troubles were only so much dirt she could wash away with the sponge. Squinting through the gap with all the leisure the moment afforded, he noticed what his sly inspections of her in a bikini had only hinted at. There was a classical quality to her splendour. Something in the set of her shoulders and the swanlike curve of her neck and the soft lines of her face stretched in an eternal channel from the past to the present and into the future. It stung the eyes to behold, filled him

with brute joy to be witness to this moment. After all the phrases whose meanings he felt he'd relearned in the course of this terrible day, this was the final lesson, the meaning of beauty.

He shivered from neither cold nor hunger. Transfixed, he forgot all thought of food. He waited impatiently for the inevitable moment when Clarissa would rise from the water to rinse herself. His inky tongue sidled out from his mouth and licked his lips at the prospect. He was ready to devour every inch of her body: every hair, every curve, every dimple, every blemish. Nothing else mattered. He was oblivious to the rain streaming down his face. Oblivious to the sound of the canteen staff finally leaving for the night. Oblivious to the German shepherd that padded around the corner behind him.

The dog stopped and sniffed the air. The constant static of the rain and the leaves in the breeze swallowed its low growl of excitement, so Ted didn't realise it was there until he heard its ear-splitting bark. He cringed in anticipation of jaws closing around his neck. The dog barked again. Ted didn't know whether it wanted him to turn and face it before it would attack, or merely wanted to alert someone to his presence. Either way, the enchanted moment had ended. Clarissa was already reaching blindly for the towel draped over the sink. She kept her eyes trained on the window like it was a bomb about to explode.

Ted turned from the window and stared at the dog. He hoped the sight of his horn alone would send it scampering into the distance. The dog stood its ground. It barked again.

—Go on! Fuck off! Ted tried to snarl, but he was unused to speaking with his heavy jaw. Its ponderous movement took his intended aggression and transformed it into a plaintive groan, more victim than aggressor. The dog cocked its head in assessment, as if considering the possibility that it may have misread the situation

completely. Then it leapt straight at Ted's throat.

Instinct saved Ted. A reflex movement of his leg left the dog snapping at air. Ted's foot grazed across its snout. He scrambled to his feet, ready to flee now, but the dog blocked his path back to the forest. The dog tested Ted's resolve with a volley of barks and snapping, a shadow play of snarling feints as they warily traced their way through a semi-circle, hunter and prey. The rain fell as intensely as on a mountaintop. Ted hoped he might yet escape, but when lightning forked across the encroaching darkness and his body glowed in response, this confirmation of his aberrant nature enraged the dog beyond belief. Its bark rose to an angry howl. A voice called in answer from behind the chalet. The words were Romanian, but Ted understood. He was about to be discovered.

—Fucking furry piece of fucking shit, Ted muttered. He feinted a kick at the dog's head. The dog's instinctive flinch opened up its flank for one decisive instant, long enough for Ted to step forward and deliver his real kick. It was a kick that demanded reparation for the fact he'd been denied both food and the full extent of Clarissa's beauty. It carried all the violence he could muster, the weight of all his frustration. Smacking into the dog's unguarded ribs, his foot lifted the animal clear of the ground and sent it flailing helplessly against the concrete wall.

Though Ted couldn't have executed the move better, he didn't wait for the impact. He didn't hear the breath whine from the dog's lungs or see its legs crumple beneath it as it landed. He was running. Once more past the garbage cans and their fresh, plentiful deposits of food. Once more past the kitchen garden and its homely scents of rosemary and mint. Once more over the depression in the fence. Once more stumbling and sliding over the slithery mulch, back towards the sanctuary of the forest. His flight was one more pattern that threatened to emerge; the only variation from the morning was that the pursuit would soon be real.

Like an old heavyweight that refused to be beaten, the dog was already picking itself up from the floor. It shook its head and gulped breath. The policeman's voice came nearer, but the dog didn't wait for a restraining hand. An angry snarl rumbled from its throat as if an engine idled within. Ted scrambled over the top of the slope, but he disappeared too late. The dog had already exploded into movement.

With its fur slick with rain, the dog tore past the canteen, cleared the dip in the fence and moved seamlessly into the chase. Lightning strobed it as it powered up the hill in Ted's wake, a demonic shadow of his rage. It didn't bark until it crested the hill and saw Ted flickering through the trees ahead. The noise raced through the space between them, relayed from tree to tree. It sounded closer than it actually was. Ted glanced behind him. He didn't see the thick tree root across his path; he only felt his foot trip over it. The ground hurtled towards him. He splattered heavily into the mud and slithered forwards over the rough ground. His clumsy fingers scrabbled at the wet earth as he struggled to rise to his feet, but he knew this was a chase he'd already lost.

The dog bolted across the space between them and sank its teeth into his haunch. Ted raised his head and bellowed in pain. Locked together, Ted and the dog formed a new beast, a multi-limbed bundle of fur dirt teeth skin leaves horn light dark that rolled over the ground until Ted managed to shake himself free.

He had a moment to notice his trousers were torn, the fabric glistening with blood, but then the dog was already coming back at him. There was no time for feints or tactics. Ted lashed out at the dog's head with his foot, but the glancing blow infuriated the dog further: he'd barely got back to his feet before the bastard thing was trying to gnaw its way to his shinbone.

Ted's body crackled with anger. He seized the dog's collar roughly, forcing

his fingers into the fur and the flesh, and managed to tug the mutt off him. Its bloody teeth snapped at the air but Ted didn't let go. He had the power of lightning. He clung to the collar and began to spin, ready to cast this brute away from him like an athlete's hammer and watch it sailing into the trees.

A gross misjudgement of their combined weight thwarted his plans. Ted was slipping even as they completed their first spin. The ground vanished momentarily from beneath him. He had to let go just to break his fall.

The dog landed three or four yards away. Ted felt no surprise when it span back to attack. In the adrenalin of the moment, he saw everything as if in slow motion. He knew he had no chance of getting back to his feet before the dog launched itself at him again. He saw the terrible beauty in the musculature of its legs, the ivory whites of its eyes, the spots of blood on the teeth that would rip him apart. The day's final lesson was nature, and Ted understood: there was always something stronger, always something weaker. Sentiment saved no one.

Ted pressed his weight onto his palms and felt them sink into the slick mud. He lowered his snout towards the ground and growled: —Come on then you fucking furball! Come on!

The dog sprang towards him, impossibly slow. Something more than adrenaline was affecting time. As Ted raised his horn, he saw the air ripple around the dog's open mouth. He saw the tips of its fur bristle with burning light. He saw a policeman inch forwards from the trees like a hiker battling a hostile gale. He saw the pistol in the policeman's hand glint painfully bright, its barrel reflecting the incandescent light that poured forth from every leaf in the forest.

And then nothing.

## **15: The sleep of reason creates monsters**

LATER THAT NIGHT, Patrick sat slumped on the sofa in his chalet. The howl of the storm drowned out his drunken snores. A thin worm of drool trickled from his open mouth and hung suspended from his chin. Patrick shifted in his sleep. The pendulous drool swung from side to side, glistening in the greenish light as it counted out with each swing the moments to its end. Fragile, the drool stretched thin as spider silk, then snapped and reformed into a drop that pocked softly onto Patrick's thigh. The dark stain it left on his trouser leg was no larger than a pound coin, but in the extended geometry of his dreams Patrick's hand distractedly rubbed a far greater area.

Pain wrenched him awake. He stared at his leg in disbelieving horror. Like a nightmare seed that had germinated in his sleep, the lump on his thigh had now swollen to the size of a tennis ball. It stretched the fabric of his trousers and visibly throbbed, a parasite with a life of its own. But when Patrick moved a finger to gently palpate it, the pain was all his. Without sleep to anaesthetise him, the pain shot through his body in pulse after pulse that an instinctive clutching of his thigh only exacerbated.

A crack of thunder sounded above the constant drum of rain on the roof and the rattle of the window, but Patrick's panicked yelp as he raised his head in search of relief from the burning pain had nothing to do with either the latest tempest or his suffering. The panic came from the sudden apprehension of his solitude. Details the night and the continued power cut should have concealed from view flooded into consciousness: the empty wineglasses on the coffee table; the dead stub of the candle and the pool of congealed wax at its base; the saucer Marc had



commandeered as an ashtray; the empty chair where Marc had sat; the blurred trees of the forest scene wallpapered above the bed.

Everything was there to see, limned in a bilious green light that sent the shadows of furniture rearing menacingly up the walls. And now, beneath the din of the storm, he heard the staccato burst of movement across a keypad. He knew it wasn't Marc; he didn't want to think where Marc might be, what might have happened.

Patrick's nostrils twitched in revolted spasm at the feculent stench in the room. His neck stiffened in instinctive resistance as he slowly turned his head towards the desk, but there were times when all you could do was acknowledge the inevitable. He had to look.

The bilious light that enveloped the room emanated in part from his laptop screen and keys, but its greenish glow was further augmented by the jagged, glowing letters that slid across the cockroach's shell, pulsing and waning in intensity with the speed it typed. Luca was wrong. The cockroach was real. Its reappearance quashed all hope that Patrick could continue to dismiss it as fancy or the result of a knock on the head. Two limbs anchored the creature to the desk chair, while the other four jumped and jerked as if tugged by invisible strings. Patrick shuddered at the sight of its stubby wings fluttering; he retched at the extra waft of fetid air they sent towards him. Lost in a flurry of creativity, the roach appeared not to notice. Its attention was focussed solely on the laptop. Its typing grew faster, increasingly assured.

Careful not to let the wicker sofa scrape back over the tiled floor and call attention to his exit, Patrick clamped his teeth together in anticipation of pain and rose stiffly to his feet. Blood eased back into his legs as he shuffled towards the door. He held his hands to his chest for fear of them colliding with something. He

looked back over his shoulder. The cockroach's shadow loomed across the picture wall, a fanged monster about to pounce on his prey. But the typing continued, his imminent exit either unnoticed or inconsequential.

Trapped in the corner by the door, Patrick's shoes looked smaller than usual in this green half-light. They appeared to cringe, two mud-stained hounds fearful of having to brave the storm. But neither the flash of lightning nor the imagination of worse things crawling towards him through the forest would stop Patrick leaving. Tonight he was determined to take his chances in the dark and the rain. He nudged the shoes into position with his feet. He was going out.

His left foot slid easily into the shoe. The right shoe proved less accommodating. Like a machine impossible to calibrate, each nudge moved the mouth of the shoe to a position where it was impossible to force his half-asleep foot into it. Patrick heard his father's voice in his head as clearly as if he were in the room, still alive, the old admonition to bend his back. But each time he started to bend, his trousers closed like a vice over the still throbbing lump and sent dizzying rushes of pain to his head. He couldn't cry out. In the effort to stay silent, he bit his lip so hard he tasted blood. He was desperate not to disturb the cockroach's rhythm, desperate not to announce his movements.

When the pain had eased slightly, Patrick kept his legs rigid and shuffled them apart until his upper body was low enough for him to lean down and hook the errant shoe up between his index finger and his thumb. He leaned one arm against the wall and crooked his right leg behind him, planning to silently fumble the shoe onto his foot in midair. He could already picture himself stepping out of the door and into safety, but something in the heft of the shoe in his hand made him pause.

Though it had been in need of resoling since long before he left Manchester, the shoe transmitted quality and weight. Perhaps not enough to flatten a child-sized

cockroach in one blow, but more than enough to inflict serious damage.

Patrick stepped out of the other shoe and picked it up. Instead of his planned flight into the storm, he now envisaged a series of perfectly executed moves: disorientating blows to the head with one shoe, swiftly followed by shell-splitting cracks to the side with the other. The shoes' leather, worn soft through years of use, welded itself to his hands like a second skin. It wouldn't be the first time they'd hunted down and exterminated an insect or felt a shell crumple and shatter beneath their soles. They promised to be extensions of his anger, make him the monster. He made a tiny assay against the air to check they'd suffer the full weight of any movement without slipping treacherously from his grasp. Then he edged past the coffee table and crept towards the desk across tiles dark as dried blood in the green light.

The closer he got to the cockroach, the more Patrick realised how deeply he hated it. He hated it for the throbbing, pus-filled bite and he hated it for Luca and Bacovia's mocking laughter in the afternoon. But at that moment, he hated the cockroach most of all for the ease with which it typed. It had reclaimed the desk as its own; as if it had never been Patrick's, the cockroach its one and only master. There was no pained, halting interrogation of each word, no apparent difficulty. The words slid over the petrol shell in an uninterrupted flow so plentiful letters of jellied slime dripped from its abdomen and puddled on the floor. Patrick had no interest in reading them tonight. He raised his right arm above his head and smiled in anticipation.

The shoe swooshed through the air and smacked! into the desk. Patrick stumbled forward with the unanticipated momentum; his thigh collided with the desk edge and the shoe flew from his hand as his attempted left hook swiped only at the air.

Howling with pain and rage, Patrick gripped the remaining shoe all the harder and turned to confront his angrily hissing prey. The cockroach crouched by the coffee table on its bristly legs. It twitched its mandibles from side to side as if readying its jaws for a deathbite. Patrick lunged forwards, but the cockroach was too quick. It scuttled beneath the sofa and out the other side to nestle at the foot of the wall.

The flimsy wicker sofa now lay between them as a barrier. No subtle or unobstructed route of attack remained. Yet the pain distractingly pulsing down his leg hadn't dulled Patrick's eye for the dramatic. He stepped forward and kicked the sofa with his good leg, sent it sliding across the floor to trap the cockroach. The sofa barely grazed its hind legs. The cockroach was too fast, as if it lived forever a second ahead of him. While Patrick stared into the space where it had been, it was already sheltering in the angle of the wall and ceiling.

—Stop it, the cockroach hissed.

—Get out of my fucking room. Now, Patrick said.

—My room. This is. My room.

—No. It's. Not, Patrick said, spelling out each word before hurling his remaining shoe across the room. It clattered to the floor in a cloud of plaster debris. The cockroach remained unscathed. It cocked its head at him pityingly. Already it was getting harder to see, the letters on its shell fading into the inky blackness of the night.

In the dwindling glow from the laptop, Patrick searched the desk for something more to throw. His fingers closed round a hardback, the copy of Ovid he'd thought was missing. Its pages ruffled out as he hurled it through the air, a bird of prey full of hard edges of intent. It tore another chunk of plaster from the wall and plummeted to the floor.

Patrick turned back to the desk and picked up a volume of Goya paintings. His thumb brushed Saturn's slavering jaws on the cover as he raised the heavy book above his shoulder, ready to devote his entire body weight to the throw. The cockroach's hissing rose in pitch. It moved back and forth with greater urgency than before. But Patrick let the book fall to his side. He couldn't throw it. He remembered too well the hands that had given it to him. A present, she'd said, for the trip they'd had to cancel. The last days when travel was too much for her. When she wanted him to leave his study door open so she could hear him typing, going on. When they both knew hope was already at an end. He couldn't throw it.

He replaced the Goya beside the laptop and scanned the desk in the dying glow of the screen and keyboard. Then he turned back to the cockroach and smiled into the gloom.

—You do know what this key does, don't you? he said.

—What?

—This key. You know what it does.

—What key?

—This one: delete, he said, ignoring the cool meniscus of slime his fingertip brushed against as it moved over the keyboard. He'd secretly known this morning the slime had never been shower gel, but there was no room for self-deception left tonight. The cockroach was here, real; the key beneath his fingertip his best hope of controlling it.

The cockroach hissed at him again. At first Patrick thought it was an angry snarl, believed he might finally have found the way to rid himself of this creature. But the longer he listened, the more the hissing sounded like mocking laughter.

—Last night. You wanted. To read, the cockroach said.

—That was last night.

—Why the change?

—Leave now or I'll delete everything.

—You wouldn't. Dare.

—Try me, he said, but his momentary bravado was belied when the cockroach scuttled across the ceiling to lurk directly above him. Patrick couldn't help shrinking from it. He had to concentrate just to keep his finger primed over the delete key and protect his final bargaining chip. In the growing darkness, the cockroach's body was a shadow against the ceiling. It slowly twisted its head and stared at him. Slime dripped from its jaws and fell to the floor in the flickering lightning.

—You don't. Wonder? the cockroach said. There is no power. But I write. You think. You can delete?

—Of course I can.

The cockroach's expression was almost invisible. The shadow of its mouth twisted into a disappointed sneer.

—Delete it. You'll still have. It.

—What do you mean? Patrick said, squinting to see, unsettled more than ever by the tone of disappointment in the cockroach's voice.

—The book I write. Is in you.

—I don't understand.

—You will.

—I—

The cockroach landed on Patrick's face. He staggered backwards into the desk. When he grasped the oily shell six legs anchored the cockroach to his body and forced his face suffocatingly against the stinking thorax. Slime seeped between his lips. He tried to scream but the noise was lost beneath the howling storm,

beneath the buzz of wings, beneath the cockroach's frenzied hiss.

## 16: Also dead

AN UNSEEN FIST hammered on Clarissa's door shortly after dawn. A dog clawed the wood; its angry bark echoing the voice that demanded they wake up. Dread swelled within both Clarissa and Marc as they scrabbled up their clothes from the pile on the floor. But as Marc tugged a T-shirt – still damp from the previous night's dash through the rain and darkness – over his head, he detected a strange sense of resignation beneath the dread.

He'd always known this would come. Since the moment Clarissa had leant forward and kissed him on the first night of the storm, perhaps even since the moment he'd received the invitation to come here, he'd been waiting for something to puncture the dreamlike state. The policeman's sneer when Marc opened the door and the snapped orders to go to the canteen were life as he'd always known it. This familiar, negative version was a far remove from the bewildering one where statues walked, blue light formed an underwater masque and Patrick promised both to read and endorse his novel. This version of life demanded neither thought nor belief; it required only submission.

Yet as they stepped out into the dawn, there was little familiar about the world. Marc felt like he was walking through a film whose narrative was hidden from him. Shrouded in mist, the retreat refused to come into definition. Smoking wedges of torchlight sliced through the air. Figures Marc took to be statues moved as he approached and revealed themselves to be police; figures he took to be police remained stock-still, statues. The air was thick with murmuring, disembodied voices and the bark of unseen dogs. The mist was densest at the base of the amphitheatre, rendering the pool invisible.



Marc felt unnerved, a climber who'd scaled above cloud and was now forced to take the newly hidden world on trust. He glanced at Clarissa but she was looking away from him, squinting into the mist. A pang of desire ran through him. His fingertips tingled with the memory of tracing her body, its lines both map and treasure. He felt cheated they'd been dragged out of bed so early. There were only two days before the debate now. Soon they'd be returning to England, forced back into the pattern of their lives. He tried to imagine inviting her to his bleak room, cooking a meal for her in the shared kitchen before leading her from the ramshackle sofa to the creaking bed he'd inherited from the previous tenant. It might inspire a brief nostalgia for their time here, but he doubted it would last beyond the moment she'd realise he had nothing more to offer. If that moment hadn't passed already. When he arrived from Patrick's chalet the previous night, her lips had gorged on his as if she knew the feast was already at an end.

After the panic that had briefly flushed her cheeks in the chalet, Clarissa seemed oddly calm. She watched the movements of the police as though she were trying to remember it all for a future novel. This, Marc thought, was her territory. Where he saw Patrick's door hanging open and remembered softly pulling it to behind him the previous night, she'd see a mystery taking shape, a corpse awaiting discovery.

When they stepped over the threshold into the canteen Marc found himself unable to share her cool detachment. This wasn't Inspector Magpie or any of the other detectives familiar from daytime TV. A fug of sweat mingled nauseatingly with the stench of deep-fat frying. Once again, chairs had been placed in a comfortless row in the middle of the room. And the sight of Decebal sitting on the radiator promised another morning of disruption, a barrage of questions that would invade his head and lodge there, a barrier to creativity.

Decebal yawned, displaying a mouthful of ragged teeth. His suit bore tiger stripes of wrinkles in testament to a night spent on a sofa somewhere. As though she'd remained at the canteen all night, Bacovia sat at the same table where she'd watched them fail to eat dinner. But when she stood and moved over to Decebal Marc noticed her shoes were streaked with mud, and bright cicatrices of flesh scored her dark tights. The two leather-jacketed heavies Marc had disturbed the day before in his chalet were here too, immobile against the wall like two more stuffed beasts. Their jeans were stained with what looked like blood.

Still expecting Patrick to arrive, Marc slid into his seat and leaned into Clarissa to ask what she thought was going on. So he missed the nervous glance Luca shot towards him and Decebal's signal to Bacovia to begin.

—So good morning, Bacovia said, then paused until Marc had turned to face her. Good morning. Thank you all for getting out of the bed. I know maybe some of you are not wanting to be here, but it is very important we talk.

—Aren't we going to wait for Patrick? Anne said.

—We can only wait for Mr Patrick Rayner if you know where is he. I do not know. Do you perhaps know?

—What do you mean? Anne said.

Marc glanced along the row of chairs. Anne's eyes bulged slightly, though whether from lack of sleep or a determination not to faint again, Marc couldn't tell. But it was obvious she was prepared for a fight, a resumption of the previous day's hostilities. As she continued she directed every word at Decebal, reducing Bacovia to a mere conduit for her latest crusade against authority: —What is there to know? I assume he's still in bed, like everyone else would be if it weren't for your thugs hammering on the door like the secret police.

Decebal frowned and said something to Bacovia in Romanian. Bacovia

answered and Decebal grunted in reply, waving a hand in the direction of the writers that left them in no doubt he'd happily excise the three of them.

—Please, Mr Carroll, Bacovia started.

—It's Ms Carroll, Anne said. I haven't had a sex change overnight.

Bacovia grimaced, her mouth a thin line that refused to yield to a smile.

—Please, Ms Carroll. Be patient. There is no secret police now. But we are interested on secrets. Yesterday nobody did not know where was the Polish writer, Mr Nowakow. It was a big secret for everyone. And now today nobody does not know where is Mr Rayner. We go to his chalet but he is not here.

—We're adults, Anne said. Intelligent adults. It's not a crime to be out of your chalet when someone comes looking for you.

—No, you are right. It is not a crime. But it is another secret. A mystery. Why is he out of the chalet at six o'clock in the morning? Like Mr Nowakow yesterday. So perhaps Mr Rayner knew where was Mr Nowakow. Perhaps Mr Rayner is with Mr Nowakow now.

In the stunned silence that followed, Marc felt a gulf open up within him. The open door they'd passed moments ago now threatened significance. He remembered gently pulling it to rest in the frame behind him after having steadily drunk Patrick under the table. Despite the wine, Marc had rarely felt more sober. He'd extracted the long-desired promise of a blurb from Patrick and had mentally replayed his words with each step towards Clarissa's chalet, one moment seized with joy, the next stricken by the memory of how lifeless his writing had seemed in the morning. Alternate futures of success and failure had tumbled through his mind with such immediacy that Clarissa throwing open the door to him had seemed, for a moment, one more manifestation of his imagination. But then she'd pulled him across the threshold with such alacrity that he read more desire than he'd

previously suspected, so that, as he'd sunk with her onto the bed, he'd begun to wonder whether she might not be his guarantee. Her novels could provide the money to live while he concentrated on getting his right.

If the violent awakening this morning had already fractured the delicate crystal of that vision, Bacovia now threatened to crush every last fragment to dust. Patrick had disappeared, like Ted before him, and it was only a matter of time before they established Marc had been the last person to see him. Marc considered telling them himself, but he also remembered Patrick's words at dinner: the truth didn't count; the truth was theirs to decide. Without Patrick here, there'd be no words to save him from the police, no words to propel him into his dreams of success. He felt the world expand around him. He'd had the same sensation in the pool the day before. Like Clarissa's challenge to swim the pool's length underwater, proving his innocence would be as impossible a challenge. Anything he said would be deemed a confession.

Anne finally broke the silence.

—Isn't that a ridiculous thing to say? Nobody saw or heard from Ted all day yesterday. Patrick would hardly go wandering out into the storm to find him.

—Yes, you say this, but this is very difficult to prove.

—Has it ever crossed your mind that perhaps they're the ones in danger? Don't you think you should be out looking for them instead of dragging people out of bed and making wild accusations?

Bacovia sighed and turned to Decebal. They spoke in Romanian again. Marc felt Clarissa's hand graze his thigh. He looked at her and saw a raised eyebrow, felt his existence shrink to the reflected dots of light floating in her eyes. For a moment it was almost possible to forget he'd been the last person to see Patrick. But where was he? Had Patrick stumbled out into the storm after he'd left and fallen into the

pool? Marc shuddered, remembering the hands that had reached for his chest, the tug of the pool bottom. Was Patrick lying there now, weighted down by water and the cargo of promises he could never keep?

As though to reassert control, Decebal moved away from the wall and addressed them in Romanian. Bacovia translated, her face untroubled by the meaning of Decebal's message.

—He says he is sorry that he wakes everyone, but he did not sleep very much.

—This isn't about sleep, Anne said.

—We waited for the finish of the storm to tell you, but last night something very bad happened here, Bacovia said, ignoring Anne. Our officers should call us every hour. But last night the officer did not call. He did not answer his radio. So we looked for him here and in the forest. This is when we found the dead dog.

—A dead dog? Clarissa said. You got us out of bed for a dead dog?

—It was not a normal dog. It was a police dog.

—Well I'm really sorry, Anne said, but animals die. It hardly warrants a state funeral.

—This dog did not die in normal way. This dog was murdered. Like the waiter in town before yesterday.

—How do you mean: *murdered*? Anne said. Are you suggesting Patrick killed a dog? Or do you mean Ted came back especially to murder it?

Decebal turned to Bacovia for a translation. Colour drained from his waxy face as she spoke. When she finished, he rattled off a flurry of short sentences that chased the tail of Bacovia's hurried translations. He delivered each one with a jab of his pointing finger at the air.

—Writers. You are only writers. But all time is question, question, question.

You think you know everything. This is not a book. Perhaps you want we take you to look the dog. We will show you what is the murder. The dog was killed in same way as the man in town. A big hole in neck. Only one eye. Maybe in England is this normal, but not here. Not in Romania!

Anne, Marc and Clarissa shuffled in their seats, freshly aware of the foreignness of the country they were in, more outsiders than ever.

Anne started to say something, but her words were lost beneath Decebal's continued rant and Bacovia's equally furious translation, the din of power.

—And with a police dog is always a policeman. We found the dog, but not the policeman. So we looked. We called his name. All night we called policeman's name. We called his phone. We called his radio. And this morning we found him. He was in a tree. He had the same hole in the chest. His skin was fired.

—Fired?

—He was also dead. Also murdered.

Silence reclaimed the room, broken only by the bark of dogs echoing around the grounds. Decebal and Bacovia stared at Anne in expectation of her challenge to this latest detail. But the first voice was Clarissa's. Marc's intuition had been right: this really was her territory.

—Obviously, we're all very sorry to hear about the murder. We were sorry yesterday too, she said. Marc felt her hand squeeze his, heard the effort in her voice to remain calm. But I think what Anne said is right. If someone's going around killing people and animals, shouldn't we be more worried about Ted and Patrick?

Bacovia translated for Decebal, but Clarissa pressed on before he had chance to respond: —You said yesterday that the people at the bar only saw Ted leaving. That doesn't mean Ted killed the waiter. Ted might have been kidnapped for all we know, or be dead too. And it's the same with Patrick. What if the dog was trying to

stop someone kidnapping Patrick? Ted's a very famous writer. People think he's got a lot of money. And they might think the same about Patrick.

Decebal and Bacovia came as close to smiling as their anger would allow them. Marc wondered if they knew who Clarissa was. Did policemen read about Inspector Magpie for consolation the way he read writers' biographies? After a further exchange between Bacovia and Decebal, Decebal retreated. He slouched against the wall and glanced at his watch, as if there was nothing more he could do. But this was only a lull. When Bacovia spoke again it was clear nothing had ended.

—It is possible what you say. Last night made everything more complicating. We look for Mr Rayner and Mr Nowakow. We hope they are secure. But if they do not speak with us, we must think everything is possible. Everything. This includes that some other person here knows what does happen. So this morning, breakfast will be early. It will start in thirty minutes. And then we will interview everyone. But now I need you go to your chalets. I need your passports.

—What?! Anne said.

—I need your passports. State Hunting Lodge Number One is closed. Nobody leaves without our permit.

—That's absolutely outrageous, Anne said, her face draining of all colour. You can't treat people like that.

Marc turned to her. What was she going to do, faint again? He dreaded a repeat of yesterday's argument. The police were already angry enough, and with Patrick now missing he was the only man left, the prime suspect. He was tired and he wanted a cigarette. Most of all, he wanted time to decide what he'd say in the looming interrogation.

—It doesn't matter that much, does it, Anne? It's probably just a formality.

—Do you mean to say you trust these bastards? she spat. Two people go

missing, two more people get murdered, and all they can do is accuse us of keeping things secret and tell us to wait around until it's our turn.

—That's not exactly what they've said, Clarissa said.

—O come on. These people are fascists, in love with power. They're not bothered about solving crime. Patrick and Ted are probably lying dead somewhere but all they care about is finding someone to be guilty. They're putting us under house arrest until they decide which one. You have to stop thinking the police are the good guys. This is life, not some crappy detective fiction.

Marc felt Clarissa's hand tighten painfully around his in the narrow space between their thighs.

—This has got nothing to do with what you call crappy detective fiction, she said. Getting hysterical about it's not going to help anyone.

—What did you say? Are you calling me hysterical?

—Anne, come on, Marc said. Nobody's calling anyone hysterical. We're all just a bit freaked out, and—

—Don't tell me I'm freaked out! This is serious. If you weren't so busy having it off with little Miss Marple there, you might start to realise that.

Clarissa snatched her hand away from Marc's.

—What did you just say? she said

—O like it's some big secret. Everybody's seen the pair of you sneaking around.

—Really? Marc said before he could stop himself. He was briefly thrilled at the news. He imagined them spending the day together, in the open, free of Clarissa's enforced subterfuge. But when he saw Clarissa's cheeks redden and her mouth open wordlessly, the image of the two of them together seemed more unreal than anything he'd seen in the pool.



—Quiet! Bacovia said. Please be quiet.

Marc turned to her, grateful for the interruption.

—You can discuss later. First you must take your passports here. You do not have to worry.

—But why do you need them if we're not suspects? Anne said.

Bacovia looked at her with narrowed eyes. Marc saw a series of repeated arguments threatening to emerge: the same objections over and over again, forever delaying the chance of a smoke, eating into his final moments of freedom.

—Does it really matter? he said, and risked a smile at Bacovia. I'm sorry, Anne, but it's not as if we're going anywhere.

—It's a question of principle, Anne said. It's about having the choice. We won't be able to go anywhere if they have our passports.

Marc didn't look at her. He kept his eyes trained on Bacovia as he spoke, a student craving approbation.

—Anne, I really can't be bothered arguing. It's not going to change anything. We give them the passports, then we do the debate and then we go home. Isn't that right?

Bacovia finally returned his smile: —Perhaps.

## 17: The town of alternative endings

THE POLICE HAD already eaten by the time Marc and Clarissa returned to the canteen. A fog of smoke hung over everything. Half-finished cigarettes floated in coffee cups like slowly bloating corpses, while others were speared into unfinished doughnuts that oozed dark jam and grey cottage cheese. Trails of sugar and crumbs and poppy seeds stretched across the tables and over the floor, an infrastructure of excess along which ants already picked their way.

Doughnuts were the only food on offer but Clarissa collected a plateful nonetheless. After a day when she was sure she'd drunk as much as she'd eaten, she was prepared to eat anything. She bit through the thin coating of crystallised sugar, into the doughy, jam-bleeding heart beneath, and tried to suppress the craving for a piece of fruit instead. She desperately wanted something natural, free of process. However much she dreaded the return to London and Ivan's phonecalls, it would be worth it just to have a proper breakfast again. Coming home would be a holiday: a month's worth of Sunday mornings where the scent of fresh coffee infiltrated every room of the flat. She pictured herself with sunlight more Aegean than Hampstead flooding through the kitchen window and pooling on the table, imagined feeding slice after slippery slice of melon into her mouth or trawling a spoon through yoghurt as thick as whipped cream. She could see the colours of her crockery as clearly as if it were there before her on the canteen table.

Marc was harder to visualise. Their deepening intimacy here and the fact he lived in London suggested he'd be in the flat too, but she hesitated to place him there. He flickered in and out of her mental picture like a TV signal that still required fine-tuning. Perhaps it was her own reluctance to imagine him sitting in

Philip's old place, blithely unaware of the ghosts that haunted the seat. Was he the one to help her exorcise the past and seize the present? She was sure relationships had started in stranger circumstances. And she was 32. She'd have to meet someone if she wanted children. She glanced across the table and tried to place Marc against a different background: without the hunting trophies; without the faded picture wall; without Anne.

Clarissa stopped chewing. She felt her stomach contract as Anne walked towards the serving area. After her slur on Clarissa as both a person and a writer, Anne had left the meeting without any further comment. Now she was here part of Clarissa wanted to stand and demand an apology; another part of her wanted to hide beneath the table until Anne had left.

In the end, Clarissa did neither. Anne walked to the zinc serving station, took one look at the doughnuts and turned away again. She frowned in disbelief, then scowled when she realised she was being observed. She turned her back to Clarissa, poured a cup of coffee and marched out of the canteen, her head held as stiffly as the death's heads on the wall. Clarissa felt her exit as both a victory and a defeat. She'd avoided a confrontation, but Anne's implication that she was a talentless bimbo lingered uncomfortably. The words were a mirror she didn't want to look into. But the reality they reflected remained whether she looked or not.

—Are you alright? Marc said.

Clarissa looked back from the doorway to Marc. Jam nestled unnoticed at the corner of his mouth, an angry spot.

—I would be if it wasn't for that woman, she said.

—Who?

—Anne. She just walked in here, took one look at us and walked out again.

Marc turned and looked at the empty doorway.

—I wouldn't worry about it.

—Is that your stock response to everything?

—What is there to worry about? People always find these things out. Does it matter? We're all adults.

—I'm not talking about us, Marc, she said, too annoyed to interrogate what that *us* might mean. I'm talking about the arrogant old bitch calling me Miss Marple. I studied her at university. I defended her in tutorials, claimed she was a feminist icon, and then she goes and says that.

—I'm sure she didn't mean it.

—Of course she meant it. She can't stand me. She never says anything nasty about you, just me. You're allowed to write something clever, but not me. I've done genre now, so I couldn't possibly be doing anything worthwhile. I couldn't be writing anything apart from another *Inspector Magpie*.

—But that's what you write. The other night you—

—Well maybe I'm fucking sick of writing it. It's like being in a bloody prison. Maybe I want to write something for me for once, something I want to read.

Clarissa waited for him to reply. She knew Marc wasn't really defending Anne, but she'd hoped for more, some display of loyalty engendered by her struggle to visualise him in her kitchen and all the intimacy it implied.

—You shouldn't let her get to you like that, he said, eventually. It's your book.

—O forget Anne. It's got nothing to do with her. But I swear to God I'm not going to write another Magpie.

Marc looked at her as if she'd just spoken in a foreign language. Eventually, he hazarded a question.

—What are you going to write then?

—You don't have to sound so surprised, Marc. I can write other things you know.

Clarissa glimpsed what might have been a look of disappointment cross his face, but he turned to survey the empty canteen before she could scrutinise it. When he turned back, his face was set into a carefully composed smile. He reached across and closed his hand around hers.

—I never said you couldn't, he said. I was just asking what you're going to write.

—I don't know yet. Something. I'm going to write something different.

—Are you going to start now? Before the police interviews?

His thumb traced a slow arc across the back of her hand. She knew its soft pressure was really a tug. The grin that accompanied it was an invitation to exist for nothing more complex than the present. For a moment she felt tempted to succumb and place her future on hold in exchange for one more morning of lounging together in bed, safe in a pocket of naked intimacy.

—Sorry, no.

His thumb stopped moving.

—No what?

—Just no. I can't spend another morning in bed. I've got to write something, she said.

—Something not *Magpie*?

—Exactly.

She tried to ignore the way Marc's hand instantly left hers. She hoped it was only because Bacovia had entered the canteen. They both watched her walk to the serving area. She didn't seem to understand that doughnuts were all that was on offer. She stood on tiptoes, peering through the porthole in the door to the kitchen

in search of something more appetising.

—Are you going to tell her or shall I? Clarissa said.

—I will, Marc said, I need to go out for a smoke anyway.

He stood before she could protest. This was what she'd wanted: Marc to leave and take with him all the excuses for not writing; leave her face-to-face with the moment of truth. But as he moved away, the mental image of him in her kitchen finally came into definition, his features sharp, real. Her body remembered the weight of his on hers, felt an unexpected tenderness.

—Aren't you forgetting something? she said.

—Like what? he said.

Clarissa stood and walked around the table to him. Bacovia turned at the noise but Clarissa didn't care. She stepped closer to Marc. The easy grin that played over his lips as he looked at her felt like a vision of the future superimposed upon the present.

—Like you said: after this morning, I don't think we're a secret any more.

Marc's smile was lost in intimacy, her lips pressed to his. Once again she had the strange feeling that this was somehow destined. Time promised to melt, a moment that stretched into both the past and the future. Knowing it couldn't do nothing to reduce its value.

She stepped away. It was time to take control.

For months now, no place in the world had felt more hostile to Clarissa than a chair before a desk. Whether here or in Hampstead, the ambush was immediate. Ideas would evaporate the moment she sat down, her imagination outmanoeuvred by the spectre of Ivan and the faceless *Magpie* fans waiting to devour whatever sentences she carelessly cast in their direction. Fame was a virus that had infected the

narrative of her life. She'd let other people repackage and rebrand her. And with each new blaze of publicity she'd mutated further into a Clarissa she didn't recognise, a mask that threatened to devour the face beneath.

But today Clarissa sat down determined to rescue the writer she believed still lay within her. She felt strangely energised as she picked up her pen, as though the slow transformation of her surroundings into a genuine murder mystery had finally released her to write something else.

The beams of torchlight she'd seen cutting through the mist earlier now merged into a single funnel of blue light in her imagination. She saw rows of faces beneath it. A cinema audience. She knew as soon as she saw them where they were. The cinema was in a town that had been in slow, barely acknowledged construction in her subconscious for some months now. She'd visited it for intermittent inspections without understanding why. She'd suffered brief visions of anonymous people in unlocatable stories, but had always dismissed them because they didn't belong in Magpie's world. But now they could finally belong somewhere else, their faces took on definition with the deliberate slowness and faded colours of a Polaroid.

Eager to write something before the police came to question her, Clarissa scanned the rows of faces in the cinema's blue twilight, determined to find the ones she'd focus on, the story she'd tell. Every pair of eyes stared back at her, rapt in the vision on the hidden screen. Gradually, she realised she needed to look at the screen too: the movies they were watching were part of the story. This was the town that Hollywood forgot, the town Hollywood forged. She knew instinctively that every film these people had ever seen was a test screening the executives had rejected. Discarded endings – where heroines die before the hero can reach them, where the lost child is never found, where the captain is a traitor, where the

criminals do get away, where crucial misunderstandings are never resolved, where the business proves a failure and the family falls apart – were the only ones they'd ever known. It was a town where endings cherished worldwide had been robbed of their finality.

Clarissa saw a young woman sitting alone directly beneath the projector and knew her story would be the one she'd follow. The girl would leave town. She'd encounter the other, familiar endings; she'd find her way in a world where people believed stories could only end one way.

The plot gaped with holes she'd have to fill. Questions bounced unanswered around her head, collided with problems she couldn't yet resolve. Her first words were halting. She crossed out sentence after sentence, then reinstated them or arrowed them to other areas of the page. The first paragraphs alone were enough to convince her she'd have to find a new agent. But Clarissa told herself none of that mattered. She trusted half of the problems were chimeras that would dissolve into smoke given time. There was nothing to be afraid of. It was the terror of creation, a once-familiar dread she longed to nurture again. The mental images were so vivid that, when she looked up from the page, for a moment she saw her own skin bathed in the same blue glow of the cinema's light as her pen slithered across the page.

Finally, for the first time in what felt like months, she was writing.

Finally, she felt herself: happy, her blood alive with hope and with fear.

Finally, she believed again.



## 18: The tenderness of the beast

STUMBLED. SLIPPED. SLID.

In the forest. Fleeing. He didn't know how he got here. He knew damn well how he got here. He saw the previous night's events as in a film, a series of clips. The protagonist familiar from the mirror, from photographs, from memory. Through the habit of a lifetime he called him Patrick. There was Patrick and there was a thing. And the thing was made of words. Green words. Words that glowed with indelible sickness. And the thing and Patrick were in the same room. In a chalet somewhere. In a forest somewhere. Off the map. And he saw Patrick wake up and he wanted him to run. And he saw Patrick limp to the door and he wanted him to run. He wanted him to run. He sensed it could still end well. Even as he saw Patrick stop and turn, shoes in hand, he felt there might be an alternative ending. Patrick didn't have to limp back across the room. Patrick could still turn around.

He wanted to cry out a warning, reach back through time. Because he knew what Patrick didn't. The thing knew Patrick was there. It knew everything Patrick would do. It was forever a split second ahead, Patrick's present somehow its past. To the thing, each of Patrick's actions was familiar, a story it had already read, or just written. There was no other explanation. He saw again the thing dodge Patrick's flailing shoe. He saw the way it exuded control and menace even as it clung to the ceiling. And he saw it spring to Patrick's face and anchor itself there before Patrick had chance to move.

Though what happened next remained lost in darkness and terror, the details were easy to imagine. Patrick's hands tore at the blinding presence on his face. The thing didn't budge. It scratched with its bristling limbs, snapped at him with slime-

strung mandibles and vomited a stream of lurid green words that slipped over Patrick's face and stung with acidic rage. They jolted around the room, a hybrid of nightmare and flesh that sent the desk chair tumbling and tore the Goya postcards from the walls. They parted only when Patrick tripped over the sofa and fell heavily to the floor. The thing clung to the ceiling once more. It laughed as Patrick scrambled to his feet, his path to the door illuminated by the thing's sick, green light. The light grew stronger and stronger, an infection that spread to every corner of the room. It made Patrick's hand look like rotting flesh as he threw open the door onto a curtain of rain that sparkled with reflected green light, the final barrier to the safety of darkness.

It was too fantastical to be real. The Patrick he saw in memory couldn't be him. But why else was he here now, lost in the forest, where trees buffeted, roots tripped and branches scratched, gouged and clawed?

He was here. Driven by terror, he'd limped through the darkness and into the mist of dawn. In the struggle he'd lost his hearing aid, and his glasses had been cracked. He heard the noise of the forest as a constant low murmur of intent. Shapes drifted in and out of his fractured vision, a mutable gallery of creatures ready to pounce. And now the muddy floor reshaped itself with each exhausted stagger forwards. It tilted and dropped, swayed towards him, refused to be stable. The world offered nothing to which he could cling.

He was here, wet and cold and shoeless. A reddish-brown mix of blood and mud coated his swollen toes. The elasticated cuffs of his threadbare socks hung limply around his ankles, a ghost of clothing.

He was here because he'd had to escape. It didn't matter how insane or impossible his rational mind told him the thing was. Nothing was as true or as real as the thing. Goya was wrong. The sleep of reason didn't create monsters. The

monsters were always there. We only dreamed their absence. The thing had possessed a truth that rendered everything else unreal. The memories of his wife. The memories of his daughter. The idea of somehow returning to Manchester and seeing the familiar view of trees at the bottom of the garden.

This was his new reality, here. An existence where his lacerated feet and the steadily pulsating lump on his thigh made each step a personal Calvary. An existence where he could never stop in case the thing was following; where he could never return in case the thing was waiting, writing its next move.

A roar erupted from the sky. Patrick flinched and raised his hands above his head for protection from the swooping cockroach. The sound continued, passed overhead. After the initial shock, Patrick realised it was a plane. It was the first sign he'd had that the world still existed, carried on somewhere close by.

He looked up and waved his arms frantically for help. Trees loomed over him, reduced the sky to small windows of mist. The plane was hidden from sight.

His arms fell to his side. Dizzied by looking up, he tottered drunkenly. He had to squat to avoid falling. The forest span around him. The noise of the plane died out, disappeared into a reality he no longer understood, no longer felt part of. It had been ridiculous to think someone would see him from such a height, through the thick mist and the chaos of leaves and branches. It was more ridiculous still to believe anyone would have called for help. The world didn't work like that. The world moved in a different dream, where animals remained mute and men could fly.

He'd believed the dream. He'd flown to Madrid the day after Rachel's funeral, stepped off the plane and, flush with the promise of her life insurance, caught a taxi to the Prado as if it were around the corner from their house. His whole life had been a fantasy he'd mistaken for normality. He'd visited more

places in the last decade than Goya saw in all his life: Mexico, the US, Morocco, Spain, France, Prague, Istanbul, Budapest, Moscow, St Petersburg, Tokyo, Sapporo. Places he could barely remember beyond the trip from a station or an airport to a bookshop or lecture hall. The details lost in a fog of boozy dinners and the repeated penance of waking in anonymous hotel rooms. Unreal.

And that was only part of the illusion. Places he'd never visited and never would were there in his living room at the press of a button: screaming women fleeing from the burning wreckage of a car; children too exhausted to brush flies from their eyes; shanty towns; giant cities that sprang up from the desert; the surface of the moon, of Mars.

It was the fiction of modern life. Everyone accepted it unquestioningly, but he knew no one would believe him about the thing. Bacovia and Luca had laughed when he said there was a cockroach. It was a world they didn't want to believe in. As if closing their eyes to it could make everything forever invisible, forever unreal: the mocking creature in his room; the nightmarish thing that emerged from the mist.

Even had Patrick's eyesight been perfect, he would never have recognised the approaching figure was Ted. He stared through his cracked glasses and saw a creature born of the forest and the air. It melted in and out of the silver birches, its mud-smeared body and fearsome horn pulsing with unearthly light. Patrick knew the creature was real. If he denied the reality of the stooped figure lumbering towards him, he'd have to discount the trees and the sky and the ground beneath his feet. He tried to summon the energy to run. His tired legs wilted beneath him. He hit the ground and watched his hands fumble at the muddy earth as if they belonged to someone else. There was no escape. The thing was too fast. A glance backwards showed it had already closed the gap between them, its arms held out in

grotesque entreaty. The horn that jutted from its head made the cockroach's mandibles seem no more threatening than a goldfish's nibbling lips.

Capture was inevitable. Patrick twisted his body and tried to shield the insanely throbbing lump on his thigh as Ted fell on him. He lay whimpering in the mud, pressed down beneath Ted's stinking mass, and waited for death to come, disappointed that his life failed to flash before his eyes. There'd been good times. And even the worst ones had been better than this. But he had only words – Help. Save me. God. Fuck. In his terror, he didn't know if he said or only thought them; either way, they were empty, useless.

Patrick screamed at the first pawing touch on his arm. He cringed in anticipation of tooth or horn tearing into his flesh. Neither came. The awful weight pressing down on him relented slightly. The pawing returned, more insistent, but it was barely more than a nudge. The dulled sound of frantic breath filled his ears; perhaps his, perhaps the beast's.

And then the paw tugged at his shoulder, wrestled him from the earth and flipped him roughly onto his back. Patrick looked Ted in the face. He experienced no flash of recognition. He saw a beast with a thick horn tapering upwards from the centre of its snout. The beast was no bigger than an overweight man, but its head was enormous, inhuman. A deep, rumbling growl shivered its warty throat. The glowing whiskers that sprouted from around its mouth waved like fibre optic filaments as it tilted its head to the side and squinted at him from its dark eye.

Ted lowered his head towards him. Patrick squirmed helplessly and twisted his head away, reluctant to stare death in the face. This achieved nothing. Enraged, Ted bellowed to the empty sky. He pushed Patrick's head back to face him. He forced him to look into his wildly staring eye. Patrick's skin tingled beneath the touch, as if a minor current flowed through the beast and powered its inner light.

Realising as his hand brushed tattered and mud-encrusted fabric that this impossible beast was wearing trousers, he made one final attempt to jerk his body and shake the thing off him. It was a futile gesture and a terrible mistake. In shifting his weight to pin Patrick down, Ted sat heavily on the pulsating lump.

Patrick howled in agony. Death couldn't come soon enough. He rolled his eyes back in his head. He wanted to see past the creature. He searched the sky but there was nothing. Only the fragile patches of mist between the treetops. No jet trails. No rooftops glinting in the sun. No telephone wires to lead him back to civilization. He was nowhere. Death was nothingness. The creature moaned above him, mocking his despair.

—Mmn-mmnn. Mmm-mmnnnn.

He didn't want to look, but the tingling against Patrick's jaw increased, then delivered a sudden sharp jolt of electricity that made him snap his gaze back to the creature.

—Kill me now, he said. Whatever you are. Kill me now. Please.

Ted fell silent. He raised a glowing hoof above his abhorrent head and smacked it into the ground next to Patrick's head. Mud splattered Patrick's face. He blinked instinctively. When he looked again, he saw the creature bring its head back towards his. Patrick flinched at the warm, fetid breath on his face. He felt a spot of drool drip onto his cheek. With each moment, he expected the enormous jaws to open around his head and crush his skull, but the creature briefly nuzzled him instead. Its toughened skin was surprisingly soft, its electric pulse gentle. It drew its head back and moaned again, moving its jaw as if in speech. Patrick felt a flush of familiar anger. The beast seemed to be attempting the deliberate enunciation people used whenever his hearing aid was off: slow and ponderous, as though speaking to him like he was a cretin would somehow make things easier to

hear.

—Mmn-mmmn, mm mnn, Mn.

Patrick watched the creature's lips clumsily attempt to shape words. It was definitely trying to speak. Its moans were syllabic, but they remained as unintelligible to Patrick as a sleeper's grunts. Perhaps, Patrick thought, he'd never escaped the cockroach and was already in hell. Perhaps this was only the first instalment of an eternity of fear and incomprehension that stretched out before him. Perhaps this was all he deserved. But at least the creature had shifted its weight. The pain in his leg had lessened and the electric current against his face had subsided to a tingle.

Ted looked at him again, pleading.

—Are you trying to say something to me? Patrick said. Can you understand me?

Ted nodded his heavy head and gave a monosyllabic grunt of affirmation. A tear of light glinted in his eye.

It was Patrick's turn to speak slowly. Summoning a calm he didn't feel, he enunciated each word with care. He made his tone as neutral as possible. There was no trace of the arrogance he'd tried to summon in his conversation with the cockroach. He remembered how things had ended.

—I won't run, he said. I promise. But please. You're very heavy. You're hurting my leg.

Ted studied Patrick for a moment, clearly weighing the truth of his words, then rose. His movements were as ponderous and slow as his hunting down of Patrick moments before had been preternaturally swift. Patrick took a deep breath. He looked to where the creature gazed down on him. Something in its impossible, bipedal posture and the set of its monstrous head suggested impatience. It was as if

it wanted him to rise and embrace it. Patrick struggled up to a sitting position instead, careful to avoid any rash movements. He sensed the creature still thought he might try and escape, but there was no danger of that. It took all his energy to screw his eyes together and squint at the thing before him.

It was definitely wearing trousers. Chinos. The beige retreat of middle age. Stained and badly torn, they gave the creature the air of a tramp. For despite the terrifying beauty of its majestic horn that pierced the air like a rhino's, there was something pitiable about the body. Its grey and muddy gut ballooned over the waistband of the chinos like the distended stomach of a starving child. And its torso was a scene of chaos. It was in a state of transition, somewhere between animal and human, a work in unlikely progress: the skin an abstract canvas of the forest's browns, umbers and greens; patches of pale pink skin were slashed through with scars of greyish, stippled flesh that glowed with the same unearthly light as the horn, as if the creature's veins pulsed not with blood but with the cold blue of lightning. What Patrick had assumed were hoofs resembled, on closer inspection, hands. They hung limply at the side of the body, the fingers arthritically bent towards one another, cradling a pad of grey flesh.

Unexpectedly, the soft brush of a tail swung into view. The creature knew it was being studied. It looked at him, helpless before his gaze. Patrick's terror and sympathy gave way to the horrified certainty that the thing was in some way human itself. A wererhino. The bastard result of some communist cloning experiment gone wrong. Was the cockroach the same? He remembered the TV pictures of Romanian orphans: banks of starved, feral children wailing from cots too small for them, abandoned by history. Was there a secret past of State Hunting Lodge #1? Was creating a forest where none had existed before not enough? Had the final dreams of madmen been experiments to make the tortured beasts of



Ovid's imagination flesh, first the cockroach and now this?

Ted beckoned with his head. The viewing was over.

Patrick rose slowly to his feet. Newly aware of his cuts and blisters, he felt a pang of jealousy for the creature's muddy, black brogues. They looked comfortable, oddly familiar. He would have bartered for them but he had nothing to trade beyond the gaudy money in his wallet.

—Mn, he heard the creature grunt. It struck itself on the chest.

—I'm sorry, I can't hear you. I don't understand what you're saying.

—Mmn-mmmn, the creature grunted, pointing at Patrick. Then it gestured back at itself and repeated that short, mysterious syllable.

The combination of his deafness and Ted's clumsy pronunciation ensured Patrick could recognize nothing more than the syllables. The spaces that should have given the words meaning revealed nothing. He grimaced his incomprehension and shrugged his shoulders in what he hoped was a conciliatory manner. The creature's gestures grew more frantic. Its arms played a frenzied pantomime of signalling Patrick whenever it made the two-syllable sound, and itself when it made that briefer grunt.

Patrick understood only that the creature was growing increasingly frustrated. It drew closer and closer with each gesture. He felt its warm breath on his face again. He smelt the rank gases of whatever was fermenting in its gut. Its crooked fingers now prodded him in the chest each time it grunted those two mysterious syllables. Each soft blow to his chest delivered a minor tingle of electricity. Sparks flickered around the creature's horn, crackled along its whiskers. Patrick attempted to stay calm. If the creature had wanted to kill him, he'd be dead already. For some reason, it needed him. Patrick slowly reached out. He wanted to soothe its worry. He longed to touch the horn and draw its heat into his tired bones.

Ted jerked his head away. When Patrick reached out again, he shook his head.

—Don't worry, Patrick said. I don't want to hurt you. I can't.

Patrick felt the creature's arms close around him with surprising tenderness. A cocktail of mildew and sulphur swamped his nostrils, but he felt compelled to respond to the gesture. He wrapped his arms around the creature and moved his hands gently over the stippled flesh. The hair on his arms stood on end with static electricity. Where the cockroach exuded venomous bile, this creature apparently craved compassion. It rested its heavy head on Patrick's shoulder. It was still speaking. Vibrations carried up to his inner ear. Ridiculously, they sounded like the creature was trying to say his name. Patrick stopped moving his hand. He listened again. It was definitely his name: the most familiar sound in the world discernible even in this strange rendering. But what was the lone syllable that followed it?

Patrick broke free from the hug. He backed away and looked at Ted.

—Are you saying my name?

Initially, Patrick thought the creature was nodding its head. Then he realised its movements had a different purpose. It raised its snout to the sky and assessed the air in different directions. The triangular flaps of its ears pricked up as it jerked its head from side to side. Its body tensed in anticipation of flight. The skin and the horn glowed brighter. Patrick felt its welcome heat on his face.

At last, through the muffling veil of his deafness, Patrick heard the bark of dogs and the call of voices. They were coming closer, bodies that would soon emerge from the mist. Could someone have seen him from the plane and marshalled a search party so swiftly? Adrenaline pumped into Patrick. He yelled for help, reckless of the consequences.

Ted backed away. He let out an enraged groan. His eyes flashed. Patrick

narrowed his eyes against the blinding light that poured forth from the horn. The forest radiated light. The mist became a glowing wall, a dazzling snowdrift piled around them. Patrick stretched out a hand and smiled encouragingly as Ted turned. He meant it as an entreaty to turn back, an invitation to leave the wilderness and encounter civilization. Ted stepped towards him. Patrick held his arms out, ready for a renewed embrace.

Patrick saw the punch only as a blur of light. He'd barely registered the incandescent fist before it slammed into his jaw and crumpled his smile. He crashed to the ground. His cheek felt as if it had been branded. The world floated and shifted behind a film of burning tears.

Ted dropped to all fours and sped into the trees. His form quickly disappeared in the mist. The glowing trail of his passage had faded by the time the police arrived with their dogs and found Patrick prostrate on the muddy floor. Whimpering and dazed, with his left cheek already swollen like a blister, he stared at them as though uncertain whether they too were apparitions. He offered no resistance to the handcuffs that snapped around his wrists but twisted his hands to scabble at the cool metal bands instead, eager to finger their reality.

## 19: Memory and mist

PATRICK WAS NOT the first writer to see Ted that morning. His mutant form had dominated Anne's dreams long before Ted had sprung forth from the trees to terrify Patrick. And even as Ted forced Patrick to the ground, his image persisted before Anne's vision, a sharply real phantasm superimposed wherever she looked. So the police calling to one another in boyish voices outside the walls of her chalet did little to make Anne feel protected. They were an army of weaklings who could protect her from nothing, least of all herself.

She'd thought she'd be safe. With what had felt like her final vestiges of energy, she'd dragged the heavy desk across the doorway before she went to bed the previous night. But the police had knocked on a wide open door at dawn. Again, she'd looked around to see her room in a state of wild disarray, as if nature was reclaiming her chalet, transgressing boundaries. Her feet had been grimy with mud and the leaves that clung to her damp nightdress were the parchment notes of a secret life. Her dreams had persisted in the panic of waking. As the police yelled at her, she remembered the way the beast had stalked her dreamself, lurking behind every door she opened. And she knew she'd reached out to touch it, an aged Europa unable to bear the weight of sadness in its eyes.

Anne felt betrayed by the memory. Awake, she didn't want to touch the creature. Her only desire was to leave the retreat and never have to see the beast again. Yesterday she'd worried the vision was the fruit of illness, but that was before first Ted and now Patrick had disappeared. She remembered the lurid pink flesh that had dripped from the beast's mouth and shuddered. Had it been eating Ted? The police might search for weeks and never find a thing, the murder

simultaneously erasing its traces. She was tired of heeding the small voice in her head that promised everything could be explained. She didn't care if people thought she was being hysterical. There had been five writers and now there were only three. She recognised the logic of elimination from the rhymes she sang with her grandchildren: ten green bottles, eight fat sausages, six little monkeys, and now five scribbling scribes. Death was just a matter of counting down. Her dreams had been a warning. Marc and Clarissa could mock her all they liked but she knew the truth. She wouldn't stay here to become a number.

Anne placed the tidy stack of manuscript pages on top of the books and the dayglo dragon in her holdall and zipped it closed. She placed the holdall on the bed, alongside the suitcase full of damp clothes, and scanned the room. There was nothing left to pack. She'd leave no further trace of her unhappy passage through this retreat than the grubby bedsheets.

Her plan was simple. She was going to the police before they came to her. There was no point in wasting time trying to convince that odious creep Decebal she'd seen a monster. He could discover its existence for himself. She was going to ask to leave the retreat. Though she knew they'd refuse, she'd rehearsed her patient explanation so many times that she was confident her logic would eventually win the day. She'd point out that she'd come to them voluntarily, ahead of the scheduled interviews, and explain that, with her passport already surrendered, there was no fear of her absconding. In fact, she'd say, she had no desire to leave Constanța, but neither was she willing to remain so near the scene of a murder, especially when a policeman had been the victim.

All she had to do was stay calm. Corrupt and inefficient police were a monster she could overcome. There'd be no need to talk about other beasts. She'd finish speaking and open her handbag, display the money that nestled there: both

proof she could afford any hotel in Constanța and a promise of reward for anyone who helped her get there.

She grasped her handbag to her chest and left the chalet. Her resolve wilted as soon as she stepped onto her veranda. It was a struggle to breathe the damp air. She paused at the top of the steps. Everything felt uncannily still. Mist still shrouded the grounds and reduced the chalets to blocky shapes that harboured darkness. The police who'd been calling moments before had fallen silent, disappeared, leaving only the low hum of the distant generator. Small birds were all that moved. They hopped below her in silence, pecking at invisible worms and insects in the scars the tyre tracks of the police had left in the earth, then fluttered into the mist as a figure approached.

Once more, Anne tried to tell herself what she'd seen the previous morning hadn't been real. But as she watched the figure approach, memories merged with reality. The outline was horribly familiar. Her mind's eyes painted in the details the mist still shrouded. The figure advanced steadily towards her, a spectre gliding through the mist without a trace of urgency in its movements. Anne tried to turn back to the chalet but her legs refused to respond. Her body felt empty. She grasped the rail of the veranda, her final anchor on reality, and murmured a prayer to a god she didn't believe in.

Finally, the mist cleared enough to reveal a face. Anne's heart threatened to explode with relief. It was Luca. He smiled as he glided past, as if he somehow understood how much he'd scared her, and then moved on, sucked back into the mist.

Anne felt weak, ready to faint, to turn back. Despite the cool air, she clawed at her blouse and pumped its neckline like bellows. She fumbled her mobile phone out of her bag. She wanted to speak to her daughter, recruit a calming voice to

shepherd her through the mist. Raising the phone to her ear, Anne pictured Jenny in the familiar kitchen, her hands thrust into the soapsuds temporarily rendering her an amputee. She'd dry them on a tea towel at the first ring of the phone, happy to take a break from the household chores she preferred to a career.

A scale of meaningless beeps filled Anne's ear. The screen displayed the same message it had since her arrival: SOS CALLS ONLY. State Hunting Lodge #1 remained divorced from the outside world and its fabulous reality of instantaneous communication. This was an emergency for which she'd have no help.

Anne suppressed the shiver that ran down her back and stepped off the veranda. The mist closed around her, a labyrinth of melting walls. The administrative office was invisible but Anne knew where it was. Grass clawed at her ankles as she hurried towards it. Her breath was uncomfortably loud, a relentless pursuer. She stumbled as she turned to look behind her. She almost fell. She almost dropped her handbag. She almost turned back. But already the dark block of the administrative office was taking shape behind the veil of mist. Its door promised to transform into a permanent exit from the retreat. The electricity generator purred in welcome.

The detective who opened the door looked unsurprised to see her. One of the taciturn giants who'd loomed over the meeting this morning, he glanced down at Anne and ushered her into the office, obsequious as a butler.

The drab office where, four weeks earlier, Anne had waited in uncomfortable humidity for her key was unrecognisable now. Commandeered as Decebal's command centre, the air was thick with cigarette smoke and the acrid smell of unwashed bodies. But a map of Constanța that had been tacked over the airbrushed trees of the picture wall offered a window into an alternative world where order

ruled over the chaos. A thick, black, felt-tip line delineated the perimeters of the retreat. Red drawing pins marked crime scenes, one in the forest, the other in the urban sprawl. Grainy blow-ups of Ted and Patrick's passport mugshots stuck next to the map added an incongruous intimacy.

Anne felt as though she were walking onto the set of a TV detective serial. Walkie-talkies chattered unintelligibly. Typewriter keys rhythmically clicked and clacked. Bodies pressed against hers as she picked her way through to Decebal's desk. She felt giddily confident, like she had the day the doctor told her she was neither dying nor going mad, simply in need of medication. Things were under control. Looking around her, she could believe that Decebal's seizure of her passport had been nothing more than a necessary manifestation of power, a crucial step in the narrative of investigation that might yet save them all.

The moment she sat down on the plastic seat misgivings clustered around her again. Up close, Ted and Patrick's unsmiling faces regarded her as if she were a traitor about to abandon them to their fate. When Decebal beckoned Bacovia over to translate, Anne wondered what she could possibly say. She saw how easily her carefully scripted request to leave could be taken as an admission of guilt. But what else could she say? That the pictures on the wall should be of a creature from a medieval bestiary?

The horrible tightness in her chest returned. Decebal watched impassively as she quietly gasped for air. His indifference appeared total. In its clinical detachment, it reduced her to a specimen, something to be observed. There was no look of concern or offer of a glass of water. He followed her gaze to the agonisingly distant fan on a filing cupboard against the wall, its whirring blades a zoetrope offering only the image of relief, but made no attempt to bring it closer and alleviate the suffocating atmosphere.



Yet when Bacovia arrived she placed a glass of cool water in front of Anne as if Decebal had given her some secret signal. Anne drank gratefully. Her ribs no longer felt like a corset constricting her being. She reminded herself she'd done nothing wrong. This was not a confession. If she gave a slightly edited version of the past twenty-four hours, it would only be the same process of wily self-exoneration as she'd been using in her memoirs. She was here to make a bargain, a simple piece of business.

In the struggle to come here and the careful choreographing of her imagination, Anne had assumed she'd be given the opportunity to present her version of events first. But Decebal started speaking while Anne was still drinking, forcing her to gulp the last of the water down in her haste to concentrate. Less than twenty-four hours since she'd first seen him, Anne was already familiar with the disconcerting way he perfectly froze the expression on his waxy face until the translation was complete, but it remained disconcerting. Something about it suggested he saw Bacovia and everyone else as extensions of his will, his job not to solve crimes but to marshal the world into satisfactory patterns of innocence and guilt.

—Inspector Decebal says thank you for coming to see him, Bacovia said. He is very happy that he did not have to wait for you. He says you should not worry about to tell the truth.

—Yes, yes. That's why I've come, Anne said, risking a smile at Decebal while Bacovia translated.

Decebal looked at her sullenly and asked through Bacovia: —So where are your friends?

—Sorry?

Bacovia didn't need to translate. Decebal read enough in the blank confusion

on Anne's face to make him snort loudly and repeat the question.

—He says he wants to know where are your friends.

—But that's not why I'm here, Anne stammered. I don't know where Patrick or Ted are. Of course I don't know.

Decebal's face flushed as Bacovia translated. He shouted at Anne across the desk. Anne flinched at the spittle that flew towards her, recoiled from the dreadful smell of too much coffee sitting on an empty stomach. The rhythmic tap of keys stopped. Anne could feel the whole office looking at her, drawn in by the anger and the sneer that pushed Decebal's thin upper lip toward his nostrils. She looked to Bacovia for help but Decebal was yelling at her now, his raised hand quivering with barely shackled menace.

—I apologise but he says I must translate this exactly. He says: If you do not know where are your friends, then what are you fucking doing here?

Anne tried to stay calm.

—Tell Inspector Decebal that I will not be spoken to like that. I'm very sorry that I can't help with his investigations, but I really don't know where Patrick and Ted are. I wish I did.

Decebal met Bacovia's translation with a contemptuous shrug. He had the only swivel chair in the office and he used it now to turn away from Anne and leave her with nothing more than his profile, as inscrutable as the marble bust of an emperor. He stared at the map on the wall and spoke again.

—He says he has agents with dogs looking for Nowakow and Rayner in the city and in the forest, Bacovia said. He says that they will be found. He says that it is stupid to think they will escape. You should tell him where are they now.

—But I don't know where they are, Anne repeated. I'm here because I want to leave.

—Nobody can leave, Bacovia said, without bothering to translate Anne's words.

The finality in Bacovia's voice affirmed what Anne had always known. There would be no escape, no favouritism. But she couldn't give in. As long as she could speak, there was hope.

—But I don't want to leave Constanța, she said. I just want to leave the retreat. I don't feel safe here. Please, you have my passport. I can't go anywhere. It's too dangerous. How do you know Ted and Patrick aren't dead? How do you know someone's not coming for the rest of us? Please. I'll pay for my own hotel and you can come whenever you like. I'll even stay in the room if that's what you want. Please.

Anne fumbled her handbag open while she was speaking and proffered crumpled notes and travellers cheques as if they were enchanted objects. Bacovia glanced at the paper in her hand and tutted. She shook her head disdainfully. The West and all its money had lost its magic. Bacovia turned to Decebal and spoke with the resignation of someone who already knew the answer. Decebal listened without turning back to her. The money sat in Anne's hands, unregarded.

—He says that nobody here is in danger with so many police. If Nowakow and Rayner are innocent he will be very happy to find them. But nobody leaves until they are found. There are no special agreements and no hotels.

Anne felt tears trickle down her face.

—I can't stay here, she said.

—There are no possibilities of going to Constanța. You must stay here.

—But it's not safe, she said, her voice barely above a whisper. I saw something.

—You saw something? Bacovia said, suddenly interested. What did you see?

Anne paused. In the moment of silence she saw the creature as vividly as if it were sitting in Decebal's place. Its flesh-filled mouth was a horror movie she was cursed to watch continuously. She no longer cared if they believed her. She could only tell them, put it into words.

Leaning against the comfortingly solid backrest of her chair, Anne tried to piece her jagged remembrances together into something coherent. She told Bacovia how she'd initially thought the beast was a canteen worker and how terrified she'd been when she realised it wasn't. She told her of the awful skin, the terrible horn, the flesh-filled maw and the impossible speed with which it had disappeared. She told everything exactly as it had happened. Blurring tears stung her eyes as she spoke. She could barely see Bacovia lean forwards and ask if she wanted her to translate.

—Of course, Anne said. She thrust the money back into her bag and searched for a tissue to wipe her eyes. When she looked up, Decebal had turned back to the desk. His face remained expressionless while Bacovia spoke, but he was definitely listening, and his eventual response to Bacovia was slow and measured. Anne concentrated hard on capturing any nuance of tone. She thought for a moment that Decebal had revised his opinion and that she might be saved after all.

The whole room erupted into hysterical laughter. Anne looked around her, bewildered at the faces: their eyes were closed slits, their mouths dark, open holes. When Bacovia finally spoke, her translation was punctuated with sniggers that drew immediate echoes from the others in the room. Only Decebal remained impassive.

—So, Mrs Carroll, she said, you do not come to say us where are Nowakow and Rayner. You are here to say there is a monster in the forest. A monster covered in leaves and mud. A monster with a big horn who likes to stand at the back of the

restaurant. Inspector Decebal says please do not worry, perhaps it was waiting for some breakfast. He says the next time you see it, you should ask it how many sugars does it take in its coffee.

—I saw it! I swear to God I saw it.

Bacovia's lips curled into a smirk: —Mrs Carroll, you have very big imagination. This story could be the new bestseller. Unfortunately, we are not editors. We are police. We do not understand fiction.

The walkie-talkie on the desk squawked into life before Anne could reply. A voice shouted above a crackling tumult of other voices and barking dogs. Decebal grabbed the walkie-talkie and yelled into it. The reply proved the end of Anne's interview. After another brief volley of words, Decebal stood and snapped out orders. Bacovia and the other detectives stood and hurriedly shrugged on their jackets. Pistols flashed beneath the striplighting as they slid into holsters. Decebal chattered into the walkie-talkie throughout, but he stopped when he reached the door. He turned and said something to Luca – who'd sat unnoticed in the corner throughout Anne's interview – and then they were gone.

Anne heard car doors slam. Gravel crunched under tires and then the Doppler drone of police sirens receded into the distance. In the bruised silence that followed, Luca stared across the office at her.

—What's happening, Luca? she said. Where have they gone?

—Inspector Decebal says I must tell you that you are very lucky he does not arrest you for wasting the police time.

—That's not answering my question.

—I cannot tell you anything I do not know. I only have this message from Inspector Decebal. Really, Mrs Carroll, you are very fortunate. We do not waste the police time here in Romania.

—But I was telling the truth.

Luca shook his head. He looked at her with a mix of sadness and disappointment.

—Mrs Carroll, I do not say you lie. Perhaps you think you saw something. But perhaps also you are very tired. Perhaps you must go to bed and sleep?

—How the hell am I supposed to sleep when all this is going on? We're all in danger and nobody's doing anything about it. Where have the police gone?

—Really, Mrs Carroll, it is okay. The police are very good. I think they found Mr Rayner.

—Mr Rayner? Patrick? Is he alive? I mean, is he safe?

—I think yes, Luca said.

He stood and walked towards her. The hand he placed on her arm aged Anne twenty years: it was as if he were about to help her cross the road. She was no longer to be trusted on her own; the world a challenge beyond her. Anne stood. She gulped at the hot mucus that threatened to suffocate her and looked into Luca's eyes.

—I saw it, Luca. I swear I saw it.

Luca looked back at her, unblinking, and said: —Please, do not worry. Soon everything will be back to normal. I promise.

Though she would have loved not to, Anne took the arm he offered. She clung to it all the way back to her chalet and didn't relinquish it until she opened the door. Luca didn't speak. His silhouette lingered for a moment in the frosted panel as Anne rattled the door in the frame to check the lock, then disappeared. Alone, Anne moved to the bed. She tugged the suitcase and holdall off the mattress and let them thud heavily to the floor, dreams of escape whose weight she could no longer support.

## 20: The negation of the real

IN THE CELL at the end of the long corridor down which the police had led Patrick, no daylight entered, no picture wall relieved the blank uniformity of the whitewashed bricks, no breeze disturbed the furry patina of dust on the tape recorder.

Patrick had never felt closer to despair. With his hearing aid lost, the only discernible sound was the muffled clank, groan and clunk of heavy, metal doors that swung open and closed out of sight, like the irregular exhalations of a mechanical beast. His cracked glasses were all but useless and, worst of all, he'd been stripped of time: the pale band of flesh around his wrist was no more than a phantom watch and there was no wall clock to guide him either. So it was impossible to know how long he'd been here, huddled uncomfortably on the chair to save his still naked feet from contact with the gelid floor. The sporadic flicker of the fluorescent striplight above and the intermittent flash of the red light on the security camera in one corner of the cell were pulses impossible to track.

The most regular occurrences lay within his body. His cheek throbbed steadily where the creature had struck him. And he'd lost count of the number of hot surges of pain he'd felt in his thigh. Time after time, his fingers compulsively sought out the bulging flesh, courting the sharp sting the slightest touch delivered, like a child who refused to learn that fire burnt. *Lump* no longer described it. It had surprised even the police. Clearly believing he was concealing something – a cigarette packet or a mobile phone in a hidden pocket – they'd clumsily prodded at it with their truncheons until he'd had no choice but to drop his trousers and show them the angry, red growth that protruded from his leg as if impatient to burst the

confines of his skin.

Normally, Patrick would have felt humiliated to stand in the hall with its faded green tiles and expose his pale shanks, scrawnily out of proportion with his swollen gut, to the police's bemused gaze, but such qualms belonged to another world. A world where a cockroach the size of a small child hadn't hissed warnings at him before anchoring itself to his face. A world where a monster wearing chinos hadn't struck him to the ground. A world where he hadn't been arrested on a charge he suspected was still under construction. A world where his requests hadn't been met with laughter. A world where black marks, a plague of imaginary insects, didn't shift and crawl over the whitewashed stone walls whenever he looked at them. But this was the world he was in now, hopeless.

Patrick heard the dull rattle of a key in the lock not as a potential release but as the harbinger of something more awful still. Instinctively, he curled into a foetal ball on the chair and placed his hands on top of his head for protection. The door swung open. A current of dank air stole through his defensive cage of limbs and passed unwelcome over his face. And then the door clanged shut.

Chairs scraped across the floor. The tape recorder clunked into life and a vaguely familiar voice murmured into it. Patrick risked a glance from the corner of his eye. He'd never thought he'd be so happy to see Decebal. The sight of him and Bacovia sitting opposite promised no release, but it offered identity. Someone knew who he was.

Patrick let his arms drop to his sides. He squinted at the two other detectives in the cell: they were the same leather-jacketed men he'd seen moving around the retreat. Here they were immense shaven-headed caryatids supporting the low ceiling. Their identical black leather jackets and gloves and cheap blue jeans suggested a sinister yearning for a uniform.



Bacovia started to speak. Her mouth opened but Patrick heard only a muffled string of words, inscrutable as the beast in the forest. Her face flushed with irritation when he asked her to repeat them. She seemed to think his deafness was a choice, one more obstacle he was throwing in her path. When she raised her voice enough for him to hear, her drawl, a studied imitation of the tough-talking cops of a thousand American TV shows, betrayed faint traces of a Romanian accent, as if anger had stripped away the mask of her aspirations.

—I said Inspector Decebal you already know. These are detectives Gago and Miklos. I am detective Bacovia and I will translate every thing.

—Why have I been arrested? Patrick said.

—Please, we will ask all questions necessary.

—Why haven't I got a lawyer?

—Please, Mr Rayner. You do not need the lawyer. Nobody has accused you for anything. You only need answer questions.

—OK, so I'm not accused of anything. Is that why you've brought the heavies with you?

—Heavies?

—Those gorillas there, whatever their names are. They're here to intimidate me, aren't they?

To Patrick's horror, Bacovia turned to the two of them and translated. He watched her mouth murmur through the syllables as if he'd somehow be able to lip-read their meaning. Their laughter in response sounded forced, a thinly disguised threat. He was an unwitting court jester; they were the psychopathic kings.

Bacovia turned back to Patrick. She told him Gago and Miklos were not there to intimidate him right now, but they'd let him know when that changed. Her

leering grin made Patrick want to shield his head with his arm again. He'd seen things in the past two days whose horror he could never have imagined, but nothing had felt quite as terrible as the current of menace developing in this room. The cockroach and the beast had been acting on instinct. Here there was nothing natural. Here there was only the deliberate exercise of power. Everything carried a sense of calculation and of choices made, from Decebal's frown to the barrage of questions Bacovia now launched.

What do you know about Nowakow?

Where is Nowakow?

Why is Nowakow hiding?

When will you say us where is Nowakow?

What do you know about the dead policeman?

Why did you kill him and the dog?

So are you saying that Nowakow killed them?

Who else is involved?

Where is Nowakow?

What is the truth?

What were you doing in the forest?

Why were you running from us?

Do you expect us to believe this?

Do you think because you are a writer you can invent any story?

Are you in partnership with Mrs Carroll?

Do you think we are stupid?

Why do you lie?

Why do you waste our time?

Are you aware your friend might need help?

Are you drunk?

Are you on drugs?

What is your problem with the truth?

Do you want that detectives Gago and Miklos show you intimidation?

Do you know what they will do to you?

What is the truth?

Bacovia and Decebal grew more frustrated with each of his answers. It was more than a question of translation. Trained to gradually eke out answers from suspects who began by denying all knowledge and then slowly crumbled into submission, they struggled to cope with Patrick's dogged assertion that he was neither mad nor lying, simply telling the truth. They wanted answers that would solve their problems, resolve the world into a familiar picture. Truth didn't enter into it; they'd never believe what had been real.

Bacovia was so incensed when he told her about the beast in the forest that she asked the same question three times. Patrick gave her the same answer. He concentrated on telling the story exactly as it happened to him. It was the first time in years he'd told a story without recasting a single detail for dramatic effect. But though Patrick knew he wasn't lying, he knew he was editing.

The cockroach lurked at the rear of his consciousness, a detail that had so far remained hidden. It had the potential to explain everything, but something prevented him from volunteering it even as he told them again about the monster in the forest. His reluctance came from more than the knowledge they'd dismiss it as a lie; he felt that the longer he kept the cockroach secret, the longer he could protect his version of events, cling to what he needed to be the truth. Because if it wasn't the truth, he was mad.

But eventually Bacovia asked the question that opened a gap only the

cockroach could fill.

—Why did you leave State Hunting Lodge Number One last night, in the storm?

Patrick paused. He remembered Bacovia's impersonation of a cockroach, a child's version of horror.

—A cockroach attacked me.

Boomingly loud in the tiny room, Bacovia's slap took Patrick completely by surprise. With unerring accuracy, her hand found the same spot where Ted had struck him. He recoiled in agony. His chair pitched backwards and threatened to tip him onto the floor until Gago stepped forward and righted it. Patrick's gratitude was short-lived. The help came at a price: Gago remained behind Patrick, out of sight but close enough for Patrick to feel the heat of his body.

Patrick looked at Bacovia and mumbled that he was telling the truth.

—The truth! she said, almost screaming. I am tired with your truth. It is stupid, not the truth. I never believe you. Yesterday you came to tell Luca about cockroaches that were not there. Today it is worse. Today it is giant cockroaches. You tell me you left your chalet with no shoes and went into the forest in the storm where are there snakes and many dangerous insects and spent there the night because you are afraid of the cockroaches. Why do you waste my time?

—I didn't say I was afraid of cockroaches, Patrick said past the smarting pain in his cheek. I said a cockroach attacked me.

Bacovia moved to strike him again, but Decebal's restraining hand was quicker. He placed it on her forearm and gently pushed her back down into her seat. In his desperation, Patrick forgot that Decebal needed a translator. He thought Decebal had understood what he'd said; believed he might be interested in his story. The illusion vanished the moment Decebal spoke. Patrick didn't need to

understand Romanian to know the exchange between Bacovia and Decebal was unfavourable to him. He didn't even need to hear. Their heads snapped back to him continually as they spoke, sneers tattooed on their faces. When Patrick looked beyond them, he made out Miklos slowly shaking his head at him like a thuggish schoolmaster whose patience had finally reached its limit.

—So, Mr Rayner, Bacovia said, I ask you for the very last time: why were you in the forest?

—What's the point in telling you if you're not going to believe me?

—You can tell me the truth.

—You're not interested. As soon as I say anything you interrupt me and tell me I'm lying. I can hardly finish a sentence.

Nothing but hours of practice in front of the mirror could have stripped Bacovia's smile so completely of any hint of friendliness or warmth. It was an anti-smile, a lie written across her face: —Okay, Mr Rayner. I promise. I will not interrupt you. You have as long time as you want to say the truth. But I warn you. This is the last opportunity you will have.

Patrick felt Gago's leather-sheathed fingers close around his shoulders as Bacovia spoke. They pressed into his skin as if the truth were there beneath, ready to be gouged out. But the implied threat was pointless. Patrick would cooperate. Lying was beyond him. After years of filtering the world through his imagination to see it more clearly, he found his powers of invention overwhelmed by reality. Alternative tales he could tell were glimpsed fuzzily through the static roaring in his head. All he could see clearly were the abomination in the forest with the abstract daubs on its skin and the cockroach working at his desk, the illuminated text sliding over its oily shell. He knew it wasn't the story they wanted, but he had nothing else to offer.

—It started two nights ago, he began, ignoring the realisation of how swiftly his past had come to seem like a life lived by someone else. Two nights ago, in the storm. There was a power cut at the retreat. We hadn't even finished dinner when it started. But I didn't mind at first. I just assumed the power'd come back on. I went back to the chalet and got on with my writing.

I was working on my laptop. I typed for maybe an hour or so until I heard something hit the window of my chalet. I don't know why but I thought it might be one of the other writers coming for a drink. When I went to have a look, there was nobody there. I remember feeling a bit frightened, unnerved. I didn't know what had made the noise. I stayed at the window for a while, trying to see if there was anything outside. And while I was there, my laptop ran out of power and started to switch itself off. I tried to get to it, to save my work, but I tripped over the table and fell on the floor instead. The power on my laptop went and I was left there lying on the floor. I remember it was dark. My leg hurt, and I was angry with myself for not saving my work. Then I heard another noise.

Patrick pattered his fingernails briefly on the tabletop for effect.

—It was footsteps, something walking. I knew straightaway it wasn't a person; it was an animal. At first I thought it might be a rat, but it sounded bigger, like it had too many legs for a rat. And the noise carried on. Tap tap tap, you know. It was coming from my desk, getting faster all the time. And then – I know you're not going to believe this but I swear it's true – there was a huge flash of lightning and I saw an enormous cockroach. Truly enormous, at least as big as a child. And it was typing at my laptop.

Bacovia flinched.

—A cockroach was typing at your laptop?

—Yes.

—With no electricity?

— It didn't need it! The laptop was giving off this green light, like computer screens in the old days. And then words started to move over the cockroach's shell, they got faster and faster as it typed. I thought I was dreaming. I don't know why I didn't run. It was stupid, but I thought it was safe. I thought it was comfortable with me there. It was like it was so busy writing that I didn't exist. But then I tried to see what it was writing and it told me not to look.

—This cockroach writes and speaks?

—Yes.

—But this cockroach is a different monster from the monster you saw this morning in the forest?

—Yes.

—And you are sure it is a cockroach? Not another insect.

—Yes. But you said you wouldn't interrupt. I haven't finished yet.

—Please, allow me one moment to translate for Inspector Decebal before you continue.

—Of course.

Bacovia's face was inscrutable as she turned to Decebal and translated.

Despite the fear crushing his stomach and the throb of pain from his leg and his cheek, Patrick felt a minor sense of relief. He'd finally been allowed to speak. He strained to listen to Bacovia and Decebal. There was no sign of anger or irritation in the tone of Decebal's questions, only a desire to know more, to clarify things. As he listened Patrick mentally composed the details of what had followed. When Bacovia turned to him, he was ready to tell her about the slime on the desk, about how he'd hurled a copy of Ovid at the cockroach. He wasn't ready for her question:

— Inspector Decebal wants to know why do you pretend to be insane.

—What?

—Why do you pretend to be insane, Mr Rayner? Do you think if you are crazy we will not punish you like normal murderers?

— I'm not insane. And I'm not a murderer either.

—Everything you say is to make a big idiot of us. But if you want to know what is insanity, we will show you.

—I'm telling the truth.

You can go to the hospital for crazy people.

Maybe there you will think again.

—But—

—No, Mr Rayner. Not but. Today we are finished. You are finished.

Patrick failed to spot her slight nod, but he felt the hands it called into action. They moved beneath his armpits so quickly that he could still feel the deep imprint of their touch on his shoulders. The chair clattered to the floor as Gago yanked him to his feet and pulled him backwards, crushing Patrick against his chest. Helpless, Patrick kicked out. Though he made contact with no one, the bare threat of violence was enough to rouse Miklos. He stepped away from the wall and moved across to him, his hands knotted into tight fists. Terrified, Patrick kicked out again, trying to keep him at a distance. This, he quickly learnt, was a mistake. Miklos caught his ankle in a painfully strong grip and smiled as broadly as a playground bully at the start of a new term.

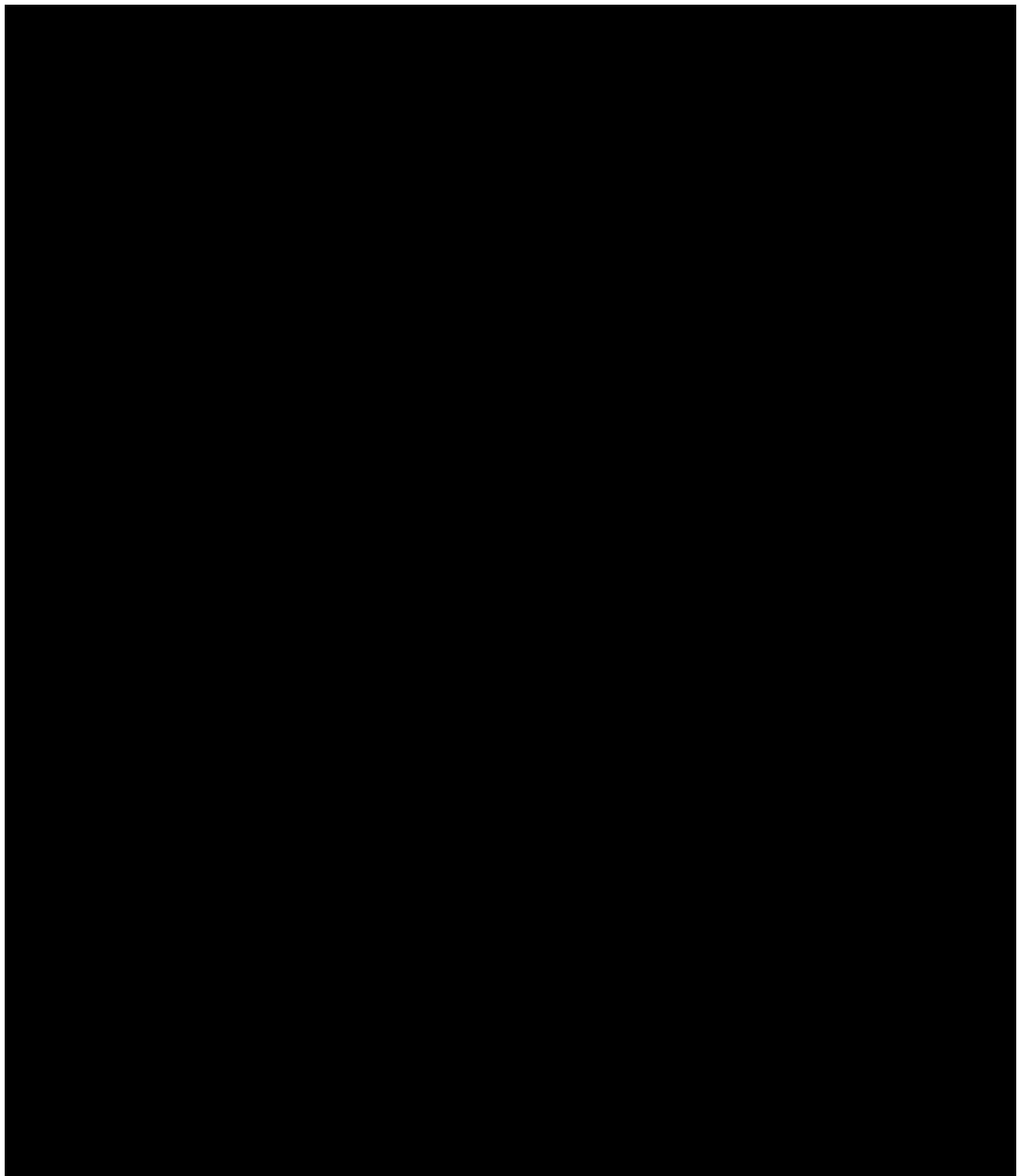
Desperate now, Patrick kicked out with his standing leg, but Miklos caught that too. Patrick bucked and twisted between the two giant detectives like a rope bridge in a hurricane. They laughed as they sought to control his movements until, bored, they let him drop to the floor without warning.

Patrick's coccyx cracked against the tiles like a forerunner of the pistol shot



he expected at any moment. He laid there defenceless, moaning; waiting for the end, a release from pain. Gago loomed over him. Patrick looked for the flash of fluorescent light reflecting on steel, but there was no gun. The weapon of choice was a foot, shod in a paratrooper boot that did nothing to alleviate the pressure of Gago's weight as it came stamping down on Patrick's thigh and transformed his every cell into pain.

A bright light blinded his vision. It burned incandescent, then slowly faded, dying away from white, through pinks and through yellows, through cobalt blue and bilious green, to black.



## 21: Chasing the light

THE AFTERNOON BLANKETED State Hunting Lodge #1 in suffocating humidity. Fat blobs of sweat rolled off Marc's forehead and pocked on the pages of his typescript, forming damp blisters that smudged the black ink of his emendations, the final stage in a chain of change upon change upon change.

After breakfast, he'd been too agitated to work at first, waiting anxiously for the police to collect him for questioning, wondering where Patrick might be. But when the mist cleared the only police visible were the two lacklustre sentries outside Patrick and Ted's chalets. The detectives had evaporated with the mist. Their disappearance, like Patrick's, was a further mystery to add to the catalogue of things he couldn't quite explain, but though Marc spotted Luca wandering through the grounds, he made no attempt to investigate why the threat of interrogation had lifted. His mind was elsewhere.

With the lifting of the mist, the world revealed itself to him in the same vivid colours as he'd seen the previous afternoon. Each leaf of the sun-dappled trees seemingly glowed with an individual light. Marc felt as if he were seeing the world in its true essence, a secret that had lain hidden from him for years. The sight was so bewitching that, for a while, he forgot about Ted's continued absence and Patrick and his promised quote, and could look across at Clarissa's closed door without any sense of rejection.

When he moved to his desk, he turned back to the first page of his manuscript. Looking back through the changes he'd made, he realised he'd been right to experience the nagging doubts of the last few days. The changes had improved the novel but they hadn't improved it enough. It could be better still. He

needed the words to somehow transmit the same hidden quality he saw when he looked outside, to capture the colours and the lines, the radiant light. His previous books had been faithful mirrors of reality; this one had to be more, a lens to reveal the world anew.

At first, he made genuine progress. His writing was as lucid as he'd ever known it. He read through newly reworked passages and felt the words glow in his mind. One new image he came up with made him catch his breath. It was the same joy he'd felt when first reading Ted as a teenager: the words no longer language alone, but life in its full mystery. Yet whether it was the guilt that realising how effectively he'd forgotten Ted provoked, or just the accumulation of two sleepless nights, he struggled to maintain the same creative energy. He rewrote a whole chapter but, reading back through it, knew he hadn't achieved the thrilling transformation for which he'd yearned. When he looked outside again, the leaves of the forest had blended into an almost uniform green, their secret energy dissipated.

Lunch arrived at one, delivered to the chalets for the second day running. But rather than refreshing him, the break deflated his mood further. Eating at his desk provided a foretaste of the grim reality of his room in London, where his desk also doubled as his dining table. He knew Clarissa would never eat with him there. The shit-smearred communal toilet and the floor that harboured its own wintry microclimate no matter how hot the weather was his life, not hers. All the familiar outlines of failure and of solitude that the retreat probably wouldn't deliver him from after all.

Yet he knew there might soon come a time when even the dank room would seem paradisiacal. The older his father got, the less grip on the modern world he had, as if he was steadily regressing to the ways of the country he'd abandoned as a

youth. It had always been obvious his father saw Marc's writing as a youthful indulgence. For him, it had never been more than a postponement of the world of responsibility, of finding a decent job, of supporting parents in their old age. Every visit home recently had made it clear that the time for indulgence was almost at an end. There came a moment when dreams had to be cashed in and exchanged for reality, no matter how unfavourable the rate.

The cigarette Marc smoked after lunch did little to calm him. He returned to his desk but was still too distracted to work. All he could think about was the way the retreat's promised vision of his dreamlife as a writer was slipping away from him forever.

He tilted his chair back and looked into the grounds. He hoped to see Clarissa, her face clouded with desire as she walked towards his chalet. She wasn't there. The stillness of the retreat was almost inviolable. Only the pool moved, its waters stirred by a faint breeze. Light bounced from its surface and threw shifting veins of shadow and light that animated the statues with illusory movement. Marc stared, almost hypnotized by the patterns of light and dark, unable to shake the feeling that something in the pool sought to draw him from his desk.

He remembered once again the statue whose phantom movement had sent him tumbling towards the pool's strangely glowing waters. And he remembered the spectacle of cold blue light he'd witnessed the following afternoon. He still couldn't work out what he'd seen. On both occasions, the pool had flickered with secret life that Marc told himself was impossible. Statues didn't move. Mosaics didn't project their stories into the darkness. Hands didn't tug you down towards the pool bottom. But something about the pool was calling him, tempting him with its promise of light and of inspiration.

He yawned and rose from the desk. The slow walk across to the window

reminded him of sneaking out of Patrick's chalet the previous night. He wondered how different his day would have been had Patrick not selfishly vanished, a master thief of the promises he'd dangled before Marc. Where had he got to when he'd been too drunk to stay awake? He shivered as he imagined him rising from the sofa in a drunken stupor and blundering out into the night. Marc had been lucky: when he'd slipped, he'd been sober enough for instinct to save him from the curious pull of the pool bottom. Patrick might not have been so fortunate.

Looking out at the shimmering statues Marc grew steadily convinced that Patrick lay beneath a funereal shroud of rotting vegetation, staring at the kaleidoscopic canopy of leaves above, one more figure in the mosaic. Nobody would have spotted him yet. Mist had hidden the pool all morning and the police had left before there'd been time to look.

Marc stepped out into the hazy afternoon. The humidity squatted on his chest like an invisible child. Scattered furniture and torn branches littered the grounds, untouched by workmen. He glanced across towards Patrick's empty chalet. The policeman on guard stared back but made no move to stop him as he walked over the thick grass.

The pool's amphitheatre was a bowl of light. The colours and the intense detail Marc had been trying to recapture were here in the chlorophyll green of the grass, here in the fissures of reflected sunlight that ran like illuminated capillaries through the thick skin of floating leaves, here in the mica glittering like sequins in the concrete surround. He considered turning back and returning to his desk immediately, but first he needed to investigate and lay Patrick's water-bloated corpse to rest.

Marc knelt on the warm concrete and leaned over the water. Patrick floated up from the tiled floor, his puffy hands clawing at the surface. The vision was so

intense it took an effort of will to stay and reach out towards the surface. He told himself it was worth the fear. If Patrick was down there, discovering the corpse might be a minor compensation for the lack of a quote. Someone would want an interview. He could convert it into an episode in a book and remind people of it all over again. He stirred the blood-warm water with his fingers. Shreds of leaf grafted themselves onto his fingers.

Slightly dizzied by the overpoweringly heady smell of chlorine mixed with decaying matter, Marc moved his hands back to the warm concrete rim, leaned over and peered down into the filthy water through the newly opened skylight. The face that stared back at him was his own: his reflection floated just beneath the surface, its features etched in shadow. Marc brought his face closer to the water. The sight of a torn strip of magazine floating and twisting along a current was his only reward. He edged along the rim and opened another window in the leaves and stared past his reflection again. An aluminium chair nestled upside down in the thick carpet of detritus on the pool floor. There was no sign of Patrick.

The sun beat down on his exposed neck as he traced the pool's perimeter and opened further windows into the fetid water. With each new perspective, he became increasingly certain that, whether Patrick was alive or dead, he was somewhere else. The dead insects floating on the surface were the only corpses he'd find. But Marc continued. Memory kept him by the pool. Finally, he felt able to admit to himself that his quarry had never been Patrick but the mysterious figures he'd seen the previous afternoon, the impossible projections of blue light. The sunlight on the surface reminded him how peaceful and content he'd felt until Clarissa had rudely yanked him back to the real world. He hadn't told her what he'd seen, unwilling to open the memory to doubt and disbelief. But the longer he looked into the grainy water, the harder it became to cling to any belief in his

vision. Clarissa claimed he'd been under for several minutes. It was long enough for his brain to have been starved of oxygen, long enough for him to see things that weren't really there.

He craned over the edge of the pool and brought his face closer to the water; his nose hovered just above the surface. Sweat dripped soundlessly into the pool. The edges of his own reflection were indistinct, blurred outlines of the self.

Marc jerked his head back from the water.

Something had moved. A flicker of light.

His breath grew quicker. He lowered his head back to the surface. Comets of blue light shot beneath the surface, their tails tracing a pattern that hung before his retina like the afterglow of a firework. He wanted to close his eyes against the cold glare but dared not even blink. He knew the vision could disappear in an instant, leave him mourning in a dulled world.

The light intensified. Soon it was as if every muscle in his body was engaged in the struggle to keep his eyes open against the flaring water. The shooting trails of light grew closer and more numerous, their threading movements weaving a dazzling cloth that blinded him to anything that may have lain beneath. Marc screwed his eyes up and squinted into the water. Eventually he had to blink. When he looked again, his reward was his own reflection; the inescapable self.

Marc felt cheated. There'd be no repeat of yesterday's magical visions. Like Patrick's disappearance and the police dragging him from Clarissa's bed this morning, his reflection was life reasserting itself, vanquishing dreams and imagination.

Weary with self-contempt, Marc drew his head back from the surface and stared bitterly at the still glowing water. His reflection floated motionlessly beneath the surface, framed by the swarming, pointillist dots of light. Marc frowned and

brought his face back to the water. The face in the water smiled. And then, as though a camera were slowly panning back, the image floating in the water grew smaller and the perspective shifted, until Marc knelt at the side of the pool staring in bewilderment at the reflection of the back of his own head.

As he watched, paralysed with surprise and terror, the glowing dots around his head converged and coalesced into a barrage of camera flashes, a press corps hungry for his image. He had only moments to take in the details before the picture in the water shifted to another scene. He saw himself from behind as he jogged along a shoreline familiar from films, picking his way through the long shadows of skyscrapers. Then he saw himself sitting behind a table stacked high with copies of a novel he guessed was his own, then standing in a room full of people in evening dress, then holding a laughing baby aloft above his head, then waiting at the side of a hospital bed where his mother lay pinned to the sheets by an expanse of wiring and tubes, then sitting at another tableful of books, then in a house by a beach whose rooms he moved through with the casual familiarity of an owner. In each successive image his hair grew thinner, his clothes more expensive.

Marc was transfixed. All other senses became subservient to sight. He forgot the stench of the water. He no longer noticed the cawing gulls above or the stale taste of tobacco or the sweat-darkened cotton T-shirt that clung uncomfortably to his skin. And he never heard Clarissa approach.

By the time she arrived at his side, she was already tired of calling his name only to hear its single syllable bounce unanswered around the amphitheatre. And now, standing next to him, she repeated his name with the exaggerated tones used to call to a sleepwalker. Marc didn't respond. He continued to stare into the pool, Narcissus to her Echo.

Totally absorbed in the spectacle before him, Marc never expected the nudge



of her foot. It disturbed his precarious balance above the pool. His weight pressed forward. His grip slipped. His face dipped into the pool, smashing through the screen of his radiant future.

Startled and angry, he whirled around. Clarissa felt his eyes pass over her as if she were a stranger and then he looked away from her, back to the pool. Reflected sunlight floated where his vision had played out moments before. The debris at the pool bottom seemed the sad tatters of a dream.

—Sorry, am I disturbing you or something?

—What? No, he said.

He turned back to Clarissa and shielded his eyes against the blinding sun. He wanted to walk away and be alone, try to work out what it was he'd just seen, but a subtle shift in Clarissa's stance told him to remain. When she asked him what the hell he was doing out here sunbathing he doubted the angry snap in her question had anything to do with the threat of skin cancer.

—I'm not really sunbathing, he said.

—And is that why your face is bright red? You'll do yourself serious damage, she said. She crouched down and touched his bare legs. He flinched at the contact, her fingers making him aware of his skin's tender state. He wondered how long he'd been lying there, watching the images, but Clarissa's bemused look could tell him nothing.

—Is something wrong? Do you want me to go away?

—Of course I don't. Why should I?

—Because you ignored me for ages when I was calling your name, and now you're looking at me like I'm some kind of ghost. Does that help?

—Sorry. I think I must have dozed off or something with the heat.

Marc doubted she'd believe him. He said it because he had to say something.

He said it because it saved him from telling her what he'd seen.

—Your face was so close to the pool I was starting to think you'd drowned.

Or been drowned, she said and laughed nervously.

—Another writer to add to the body count?

—Yeah.

—Actually, I did come out here because of Patrick. I was sitting at my desk and I couldn't get the idea out of my head that he might have drowned last night.

—Isn't that a bit melodramatic?

—He was fast asleep when I left him, but he'd drunk so much he could easily have got up and wandered into the storm, fallen down here.

—But I take it he's not down there after all?

—No.

—Good, she said. At least that means I can paddle.

Clarissa stepped out of her expensive-looking flip-flops, sat down next to Marc and slipped her feet into the water. Marc watched her tanned, bare legs move slowly up and down. Each movement disturbed the surface further. Leaves floated across the water, closed the window into which he'd stared. She ruffled his hair affectionately, ignorant of the chasm of loss opening within him.

—So aren't you going to ask me if I did any work today? she said.

—Hey, Clarissa. Did you do any work today?

She smiled.

—I might have done.

—Let me guess: a murder story where a female novelist in her late fifties comes to a grisly end?

Clarissa frowned

—I don't do revenge novels. And if I did I'd choose a more worthwhile

target than Anne.

—I thought she was your arch enemy after this morning.

—Maybe we all needed to calm down a little.

—Probably, he said. Still kneeling, he shifted closer to her, into her shadow, and brushed her thigh with his cheek. I suppose it must be useful for your writing to see the police so close up.

She mimed a slap at his head.

—I told you, I'm not going to write about Magpie all my life. I've started writing something completely different.

—What about?

—I'm not telling you yet. I need to get my head around it first.

—You'd better be quick. We're leaving soon, unless Decebal keeps us here for ever.

—So maybe I'll have to get my head around it after we've left.

—But when are you going to tell me?

—I'll tell you when I'm ready.

—What? In London?

—Unless it disappears in the meantime, yes.

They grinned shyly at each other. Their words were a window into a future neither of them was ready yet to openly acknowledge they desired. Marc searched her eyes for traces of what she was thinking. He imagined her imagining them together in her Hampstead apartment, nervously handing him the first pages for his opinion.

As if to testify to her newfound confidence in them as a potential couple, Clarissa leaned down and kissed him. Marc responded haltingly at first, but as her lips continued to press against his, he reached up and pulled her closer.

Clarissa stopped trailing her legs through the water. She closed her eyes. She didn't see Marc staring at her or detect the strangely elegiac way in which his fingers traced her skin like a blind man eager to record the contours of a statue he knew he'd never encounter again.

Guiltily, Marc stared at her closed eyelids through a veil of memory, the repeated images of the future he'd glimpsed in the pool. Everything he'd seen had struck him as real. But though he'd gazed expectantly into the glowing waters, they'd failed to yield a single glimpse of Clarissa. The future they'd revealed had been his alone.

## 22: From darkness

WHEN TED SAW the retreat spread out below him in the twilight, he immediately turned and ran. The forest buckled and bulged towards his eyes. The earth rippled beneath his feet. Tree roots twisted and writhed like serpents. Overhanging fronds were talons that clawed at his face. Tree stumps shaggy with moss looked like wild beasts stirring from sleep. Everywhere he looked, light poured forth from the leaves, their veins incandescent skeletons intent on returning all they'd ever absorbed to the sky.

He fled. And then he was back where he started: staring at the retreat in the gloaming with no memory of how he'd got there.

Several times, he crashed back into the forest. He tried different directions. He tried to surprise his other self with disguised movement. He even tried walking backwards with his eye fixed on the retreat. His cunning counted for nothing. Each escape ended the same way. Within a few frenetic paces, the forest shifted once more with secret life and he returned to the same point, like a dreamer who opened door after door but always entered the room he'd just left.

Defeated, Ted crouched in the undergrowth and looked around him, relocating himself in the world. The rainclouds crowding the sky and the deepening gloom were an impossible future, an evening that had arrived without a day to precede it. He could recall the morning mist and the unexpected encounter with Patrick; the rest of the day was a blank, from the moment he'd heard the dogs bark in the distance to when he saw the retreat again. It was all lost to the mysterious other the lightning had awoken within him. But he was here now and it was easy to guess why. Hunger gnawed at his stomach with a thousand tiny fangs, while his

skin flickered now with no more than a faint light, a ghost of its former glory.

Whatever sustenance the controlling beast inside him needed, it wasn't available in the forest. It was in the grounds of State Hunting Lodge #1 and only Ted could find a safe way in.

But Ted had learnt patience. He swore there'd be no repeat of the previous night's mistakes. As the rainclouds descended, he remained hidden in the undergrowth and watched the retreat move towards sleep. Tonight he had no other plan than to wait.

Anne was the first writer to leave the canteen, her skin spectrally pale in the gloom. Standing in the doorway for a moment, she surveyed the forest as if she knew something lay out there. Ted tensed his muscles. He was ready to run at the first scream. Her eyes passed over his hiding place and then she scurried to her chalet without a backward glance. Marc and Clarissa followed soon after. Ted growled involuntarily at the memory of his brief, stolen glimpse of Clarissa's naked body. His growl deepened when, after they'd ambled across the grounds, Marc placed a proprietorial hand on her ass and steered her into his chalet.

Rain began to chatter across the leaves around Ted. He was ravenous now, but still he waited. There'd been no sign of that traitor Patrick yet and, outside the chalet to which Ted had once dreamed of returning, a new policeman stood guard. The policeman he'd glimpsed the previous night had waved a pistol at him; this one cradled a submachine gun. He stroked the handle placatingly, as if the gun were a metal infant forever on the point of erupting into squalling bursts of anger.

In vain, Ted willed the sky to crack and flash with terrible lightning and smite the policeman down where he stood. To Ted's dismay, another policeman appeared instead. He'd been hidden from view by the bulk of Patrick's chalet, but he now began a patrol of the grounds. Rain flitted blackly through the thick beam

of his torch, a swarm of silverfish that grew thicker and thicker as he walked. Ted drew back a little, but the torchbeam never played over the trees. It passed across the faces of the statues, over the damp concrete of each building, and finally came to rest outside Ted's old chalet.

The policemen huddled together in low conference and shared a cigarette. Darkness closed around them and shrank their presence to the glowing red coal of the cigarette. Ted looked at Patrick's chalet. It was shrouded in darkness too. He allowed himself a brief snort of triumph. Patrick must have left the canteen before Ted's arrival. Either that or his terror at the sight of Ted had knocked him out for the day.

Ted glanced towards the canteen. It too had melted into the darkness. He wondered how much longer the police would be distracted. He looked back to the chalet and saw the door was open. He caught a momentary snapshot of his old life, then the door clicked shut. Nobody stood outside. Nobody moved in the grounds.

Ted padded forward on all fours, cautiously snuffling the air. The constant hiss of rain on the treetops rendered his movement soundless. But Ted knew too much now to take chances. His mistakes were a path he refused to retread. When he descended, he ignored the tempting, familiar depression in the fence and circled the perimeter instead, squinting into the darkness to check that no further police lurked hidden. He was ready to run when a shadow emerged from the administration block but the shadow made no move towards him. It hurried across the grounds in the faint moonlight that glimmered through a break in the cloud, knocked on the door of the staff quarters and stepped inside. The retreat sank further into darkness, plunged Ted into a deeper solitude.

He could wait no longer. The rain was increasingly chill on his stippled face; the glow of his skin had faded almost to nothing. He stepped over the depression in

the fence and, after one more sniff of the air, re-entered the retreat with halting steps, his progress slow and careful as an assassin's. He was alone. Nobody heard him try the locked door of the canteen kitchen. Nobody saw him follow the rich scent of the bins. Nobody saw him slowly push the lid upwards and stand before the slick, piled slops that glinted like pirate's treasure in the sparse light of his horn.

He was a forest king, reduced to banqueting from dustbins, alone.

After nearly two days with no more food than the occasional leaf, fastidiousness was beyond him. He was an animal. He needed to eat. Where yesterday's dreams had been of baking hot rolls and doughy pizza slices, today's were simply of sustenance, the feel of food melting to mush in his mouth. First he wolfed down a stub of cheese dusted with coffeegrinds, then he devoured a half moon of gâteau decorated with fake candy strips of vegetable peel in a single bite. They were only the start. Magically, the bin never stopped giving. Ted consumed without thought, knowing there would always be more: a slice of lasagne garnished with soap-perfumed scraps from the kitchen plughole; bread rolls so stale he had to crush them with his jaws; an apple soft and wrinkled with age, slippery with a coating of accumulated grease; a half-eaten burger whose stale bun concealed the prize of a gherkin's sharp vinegary sting; a slice of sour cherry pie smothered in creamy, whipped carp roe; the chance combination of a pastrami slice glued to a doughnut stuffed with sour cottage cheese was a pizza in all but name.

Had the bin contained a further bounty of half-emptied wine bottles to complement the feast and assuage his growing thirst, Ted could have stood there until daybreak, digging his way through the warm strata of decomposing food to excavate the fossil of a grilled trout or the prize of a whole sausage delicately filigreed with mould. But the more he ate, the more painful it became to swallow.



After a stale bread roll literally shattered in his mouth and its pieces scratched down his oesophagus like shards of broken pottery, he gasped and croaked with the effort of not collapsing into an incriminatingly loud coughing fit.

He had to drink. Regretfully, he closed the lid of the bin, dropped to all fours and crawled towards the wall of the canteen, sniffing the air for the ferrous trace of a dripping faucet. He nostalgically recalled the babbling creek in the forest. It would have been easy to go there now and lap its cool waters, but he was reluctant to cede his territory so soon after reclaiming it. There was no guarantee the future would yield such a rich harvest ever again. And even if he tried to return to the creek, how long would it be before trees shifted and light surged from the darkness and he found himself back here, searching for a faucet that didn't seem to exist? He looked at the ground. The wet grass shimmered with the reflection of his renewed luminescence, but he couldn't drink dew. What he needed was a deep, cool puddle, a midnight mirror he could set rippling with his tongue. A pool.

His face leered into a brutish grin. The swimming pool was enormous, a match for his appetite. If his luck held, he'd be able to shuttle between food and water all night. He moved forwards slowly, his progress punctuated by frequent pauses to test the air for changes in taste, scent, sound. He'd take no chances. The world was hostile. He needed to survive, to see the dawn seep over the horizon.

Reaching the corner of the canteen, Ted edged forwards and scanned each of the buildings in turn. None nursed a single glimmer of light. The rainclouds had blotted out the moon completely. Only two things relieved the darkness: one was the cold blue radiance that steadily pulsed from his body; the other was the strange nimbus that hung faint in the air above the pool, rimming in eerie light the statues whose unseeing eyes watched him scamper down the slope.

Ted was too thirsty to worry about the phosphorescence that glowed through

the mottled covering of leaves. In an unconscious mirroring of Marc's actions earlier that day, he knelt on the edge, leaned over and punctured the floating membrane of vegetation with his hand. But Ted was uninterested in studying his reflection or inspecting what might lie beneath. He thrust his snout in deep – as if nothing short of total immersion could slake his terrible thirst – and guzzled down the cool, chemical water.

The chlorine burn transported him to childhood trips to the swimming baths. He saw scrawny boys and girls shivering in lines on opposite sides of the pool while the teacher's admonitions not to drink the water echoed around the tiled hall. Ted didn't listen. Each mouthful made him eager for more, his thirst unquenchable. He didn't come up for air until the last moment possible. Even as he was trying to breathe, his tongue flicked out, clicking greedily on the surface.

In his urge to plunge his snout back into the water, he nearly missed the flicker of movement above him. It was momentarily visible out of the corner of his eye, and then it wasn't, as if there'd been nothing. But Ted was sure he'd seen something, a temporary disturbance of the night. Instinct made him freeze. He wouldn't outrun a bullet. His only hope was to crouch there and hope his renewed glow would camouflage him against the pool's phosphorescence. Time stretched. Each second became a minute, a minute the longest hour. It was an eternity heavy with potential.

Nothing happened. There was only the soft fall of the rain and the slow bubbling of water beneath his lips. Eventually, he dared to raise his head. The chalets remained blanketed in darkness. No torchlight cleaved the night. There were only the statues and the pool's unearthly light playing over them.

Ted grunted with relief. He decided the flicker of movement had been nothing: at worst it was a reminder from his other, lurking self that it could retake

control at any moment now he'd safely negotiated entry to the grounds; at best it was proof that, with his powers restored through food and water, Ted commanded his own existence again and could resist the animal usurper. It made little difference either way. The thing to do now was to drink and then eat. He was already turning back to the pool when one of the statues moved.

Barely discernible in the darkness, the statue glided in profile along the rim of the amphitheatre. It was a statue of a woman. It passed among the other statues, trailing its hands across their unresponsive forms as if it would tempt them from their petrified state to join its midnight promenade. Ted shuddered with an all too human unease.

The statue stopped. It turned to face the pool and stood staring out into the night, impassive as a di Chirico bust. It stayed there so long that Ted began to wonder if its journey through the night had ended, but then it moved again. Abandoning its lofty position, it descended the slope with the same slow footsteps and headed directly to where Ted crouched.

Ted didn't move. Yesterday he'd fled from the dog; today he was ready to stand his ground. With an economy of movement that didn't waste a single calorie of the newfound energy that food and water had pumped into him, he twisted his body round to face the statue and squatted menacingly. A statue that walked was part of the same mystical world that had transformed him. But though they were equals in enchantment, this was his territory, his precious watering hole to defend. He pressed his arms into the ground to gain maximum leverage. He saw his thick muscles ripple with renewed light. Then he lowered his head and exposed his steadily pulsing horn to the night like a newly unsheathed sword.

Moving his heavy head a fraction to the right, he squinted out of his left eye. Dark flowers of rage and resentment unfurled within him as the features of the

statue slowly became visible in the aquarium glow of the pool. This was not a statue. This was Anne. Anne who'd discovered him at the canteen. Anne whose screams had sent him howling into the forest. Anne who'd stayed here in comfort while he'd been outcast into the forest, reduced to eating the mouldering refuse of their table.

There was something not quite right about her. She appeared untroubled by the way the rain and the breeze cloaked her white nightdress to her skin. Her lips mouthed silent words. Her hands stretched out before her as if to break an impending fall. But it was Anne. And already she was so close that the advantage of a potential charge had been lost. Ted pushed himself up from the poolside as she approached. He rose to two feet once more, ready to tower over her and silence her screams with a single swipe of his fist.

It was as though he were invisible. Uplit by the phosphorescent glow, Anne's face betrayed no flicker of emotion. Raindrops fell from her forehead and slid unregarded over the surfaces of her blindly staring eyes. Despite himself, Ted felt a strange panic at her failure to blink. He felt himself more the quarry of strange forces than ever before. He let out a soft, low growl from the back of his throat, warning her to come no nearer.

Anne stopped. Finally, Ted saw a sign that she recognised his existence. Her eyes flicked over his body, from his muddied brogues to his horn. She laughed delightedly. Hands that had been held rigidly before her like a sleepwalker's now acquired mobility and reached out for him. In his surprise, Ted stepped back. The pool yawned behind him, a watery prison she could consign him to with a gentle shove.

He never expected her fingers to close around his arm and pull him forward to safety. He never expected her mouth to break into a grin wide with complicity.

And he never expected her to envelop him in a tight embrace. Her warm breath on his chest sent a tug of desire through him, as if somewhere inside his clumsy, hybrid form, the potential for love still lingered.

Moments before, he'd been ready to strike her into silence. Now he shuffled forwards, slowly waltzing them away from the pool. He knew this was the time to run. He wanted to push her away and lose himself in the forest before she could raise the alarm. But Anne pulled him closer. She rested her head against his chest like a prom queen begging the indulgence of her dreams for one final dance, her face bathed in the electric glow of his skin. They pulled in opposite directions, one desiring intimacy, the other escape.

When Ted broke free, Anne's look was so disappointed that Ted felt ashamed. There was something uncanny in her unblinking eyes, but there was no malevolence. Where Patrick had performed a charade of understanding, Anne's affection seemed genuine. She stretched out a hand. The extended fingers gently pressed his stippled skin and its mottled covering of mud, dust, leaves and hair. Her touch was an entreaty to stay. Her tenderness was as incredible to Ted as his own metamorphosis, but watching her fingers daub slow patterns in the greasy mud on his chest, he had no choice but to believe.

She watched entranced as her fingers traced a slow journey north, over his chest, across his shoulder, over his thick neck, across his food-smearred jowls. Ted yanked his head away before she could touch his horn. She smiled at him indulgently, convinced this was a pleasure he couldn't withhold from her forever.

Ted attempted a smile in return. The soft light from the pool and his body stripped the years from her as it danced across her face. The rain-soaked nightdress clung transparently to her body. In the flesh that showed through and the marks his muddy chest had left across it, there was an imprint of their embrace, an invitation

to repeat the unexpected intimacy of moments ago. Anne followed his gaze. As if reading his thoughts, she reached forward, grasped one of his clumsy hands and pressed it to her breast. Then she brought her face to his and ran her tongue lasciviously across his wrinkled lips.

Ted felt the familiar oblivion of desire. Thoughts of escape dissolved into the night air. He no longer worried about the proximity of the other chalets or marvelled at the strangeness of Anne's transformation. Only a day ago, she'd screamed at the sight of him. But that was the past. Now she dropped to her knees and tugged his filthy chinos and soiled boxers down around his ankles. Ted kicked off his brogues and stepped out of his last clothes. He stood newly shy and naked in the rain as she tugged gently on his penis, stirring it into its familiar mutation.

For a moment, Ted thought she was going to blow him, but Anne had one further transformation to undergo. Crouched on all fours beneath him, she turned her back and tugged her clinging nightdress up around her waist to bare her swan-white, heifer-wide rump to him. She glanced over her shoulder and smiled, then looked ahead to the darkness.

Entering her was both a forgetting of everything and a remembering. Time shrank and expanded. It was simultaneously the first time and the accumulated succession of every time he'd ever had sex. Anne was Anne and Charlotte and Erika and Faye and Heidi and Irina and Lourdes and Ros and Marilyn Monroe and Lauren Bacall and Jane Fonda and all the women he'd ever slept with whether in his body or in his head, a sexual banquet as rich as the food the bins had offered. He quickly lost himself in the rhythm they established and felt a horrible weight of loss when her body jerked against it. Instinctively, he pressed into her further, used his massive weight upon her to calm the forwards pitch of her body and maintain their strange congress. Anne tried again to wriggle free. He felt her body twist

beneath him. Again, he pressed forward, their heads almost colliding as she turned to come face-to-face with the creature inside her.

The moment she blinked, Ted knew the spell had been broken. The enchanted dream was over. It was not his strange beauty that entranced her now but his terrible aspect. It was not pleasure that made her scream or set the air rippling and shimmering around her mouth as if through heat distortion. He saw the stray leaves and petals in her hair burn with light and understood.

Anne managed to move her head enough to make the first blow only glancing, but there was no further room for manoeuvre. Ted's aim was truer the second time. And the third. And the fourth. Soon she stopped resisting. Her body went limp beneath him, but Ted continued. The thudding blows rained down on the back of her skull until her blood ran black in the blue light, an inky trail inscribing her death across the concrete.

Ted rose to his bare feet. Anne's body slumped to the floor. Her eyes stared into the spreading mirror of her blood as if in search of the life she'd already lost. Ted scanned the rim of the amphitheatre for signs of discovery. Nothing moved save the thin tendrils of steam rising from his skin. Panting, he started to move away, then stopped.

He walked back to the pool. He crouched down and took one more drink of water before he shuffled sideways to Anne's still warm corpse, lowered his head and tipped her into the glowing water with his horn. Anne sank noiselessly beneath the surface. Ted stood and scrambled his way up the slope and into the forest. His chinos and shoes lay abandoned, crumpled in a heap in the spiky grass: the last remnants of the human; a part of him no longer.

### **23: Dream of lies and inconstancy**

LATER THAT NIGHT, Patrick woke to see Rachel, his dead wife, enter the psychiatric ward where the police had abandoned him that afternoon. Cramped and with no other furniture than the platform that served as a bed, it was a cell in all but name. It was a room designed to reinforce the impossibility of escape. But Rachel passed unhurriedly through the thick, solid steel door. She stood in silence, her flickering body formed of the crosshatching familiar from Goya etchings. The lines knitted themselves together into tight blocks of shadow, then loosened again into light as she moved towards him. Patrick whimpered as she drew closer. It was impossible for her to be here; it felt true.

The further she advanced into the ward, the lower the temperature seemed to drop. He pressed his back against the wall and felt his skin adhere to the dank surface, like an unsuspecting tongue caught against an ice cube. There was nowhere he could run to, nowhere he could hide. Even his blurred vision couldn't save him. His cracked glasses lay somewhere in the darkness, but every detail was as painfully clear as something played out in his mind's eye. In desperation, he lowered his head to his chest and squeezed his eyes closed, but denying her ghost perception didn't deny its existence. The air on his face grew steadily colder. Pale light infiltrated the darkness of his closed eyelids and left him trembling in anticipation of an impossible touch.

Ever since Rachel's death, people had spoken of her as though she still existed. They'd told him what she would and wouldn't want. They'd assigned reactions to her that ranged from pride to shame, swept from sorrow to delight. Selfish in their grief, they'd made life bearable by reducing her death to an illusion.



Patrick had resented every word. Each ridiculous claim was a usurpation of his love, a blithe suggestion that they'd somehow known her better than he ever had. He was the one who'd nursed her through those final months, not friends or relatives or their daughter. He was the one who'd been with her. He was the one who'd watched her piss, shit, vomit and bleed, the illness a secret her body could no longer contain. He was the one who'd knelt on the kitchen floor and watched the water in the washing machine turn pink with diluted blood, then drain away, the final vestiges of her flesh.

He was the one, not them. He was the one left in the empty house, her ghost his only company. He'd spoken to her then more than he wanted to admit. And whenever booze had failed to deliver sleep, he'd found himself forming a picture of a vague afterlife where the two of them could meet again, free of God and of concern, restored to the first flush of love before time and over-familiarity reduced them from the divine to the human. Those thoughts had been idle fantasies to while away the long hours of night and relieve the vastness of the bed, something to make the prospect of death bearable. He'd never expected her to return.

The light behind his eyelids glowed more brightly. The graveyard stench of cigarettes long abandoned in ashtrays swamped his nostrils. There was no sanctuary in darkness. He opened his eyes and saw Rachel's face inches away from his. He'd dreamed of a different face, one that offered a tender smile of forgiveness. This Rachel grimaced at the sight of him finally looking at her, then opened her mouth. Her lower jaw stretched beyond all limits of elasticity and left a gaping hole of blackness in her face. Patrick watched as she disgorged a steady, pale blue stream of smoke. Rachel had never smoked, but her ghost returned the noxious fumes of every cigarette he'd ever smoked in their time together, from the filterless gauloises he'd affected when they first met to the thin roll-up he'd

smoked guiltily outside the cancer hospice gates while she'd slept; its sharp taste had lingered in his mouth when he returned to her room and found her staring lifelessly at the ceiling, still searching for someone who'd relieve the disappointment of dying alone. That was the last cigarette he'd ever smoked.

Guilty tears stung his eyes. He tried to speak but could barely breathe. He mentally scabbled for words of love, but all he managed to gasp was: —Sorry.

Her voice rasped unfamiliarly, like a file across iron: —Watch.

She was next to him on the bench, sitting to his right. When he turned to her, she raised a silencing finger to her lips. She pointed before them. The swirling cloud of smoke now radiated a cool blue light.

The air was alive with voices, snatches of half-remembered conversations that swept away from him before he could make out the words. Dark shapes swooshed over their heads, sucked into the smoke that slowly coalesced into an impenetrable barrier across the breadth of the ward, obscuring the door and its empty promise of release. The smoke was a screen on which spectral images flickered into life. Patrick and Rachel's ghost sat together bolt upright, staring forwards in a cruel parody of cinemagoers, their first date of this new afterlife.

His own ghost appeared, a double etched in the same cross-hatching as Rachel's spectre. It stared out of the centre of the glowing screen while the images to its right recreated scenes whose every detail Patrick recognised. They were episodes from his life: lies he'd told her; infidelities; scenes of anger and loathing; and cigarette after cigarette after cigarette. They formed a catalogue of selfish pleasures taken, easy options chosen, failure after failure to prove the human being she'd believed him to be. It no longer mattered if the glowing screen was real; everything it showed had happened.

Images of his transgressions passed with nightmarish speed, but he processed

them instantly. It was as if his conscious and subconscious were conspiring to guarantee an electric charge of guilt with each new projection of betrayal, ensuring he wouldn't miss a single one. Yet for all their horror, after the cockroach and the beast in the forest, these images were almost homely. They were things he knew, things he could explain. Even Rachel's ghost beside him was nothing he hadn't previously imagined. But the smoking screen had more to reveal.

Appalled, Patrick watched as his ghost's head began to stretch like a blob of clay being teased apart from both sides. Mirror images of his face pulled in opposite directions until his spectral double was left a perfect Janus: one side of his newly two-faced self continued to observe the images that moved to the right; the other stared at those that flickered into life on the left.

The images began as a simple mirror of each other, then quickly diverged. It seemed it wasn't enough for him to witness the basic acts of betrayal of their marriage. Where Janus had seen both past and future, his twin heads in the vision looked to something else. The head on the right saw the life he'd led; the other saw the fictions he'd made of them. Trapped on the bench, next to Rachel's ghost, Patrick saw both. He saw every lie and deceit. He saw each of the times he'd greedily transformed their life together into something for his books, each of the times he'd decided that her feelings and their privacy were worth less than the words he could commit to the page. Guilt was a useless emotion now. It was too late. He'd taken their whole life together and used it as fodder for his monstrous ego.

The steady tap-tap of a keyboard began to echo around the room. A feculent stench now mixed with the smell of dead ashtrays. Rachel's ghost turned to Patrick and nodded to the once empty space to his left. The cockroach sat there, casting its bilious glow over him. Its bristly limbs jerked through sentence after sentence, the

scribe of his treacherous past.

Patrick tried to move but his body refused to obey. He'd lost control, his sanity a precious gift left somewhere never to be reclaimed: in the chalet; in the forest; in the police cell; in the lump that throbbed and swelled further with each fresh shift of image on the glowing screen of smoke; in the two-faced double before him; in his ghostly companion; in the driving rhythm of the laptop keys that drowned out his lunatic scream.

## 24: The final awakening

ANNE PASSED THE night supine on the mosaics at the pool bottom: undisturbed by the tickling caress of the leaves, unashamed by the nightdress still rucked around her waist, untroubled by the blood that smoked from her gaping head wound and merged into the water.

As if in preparation for a ceremony, gentle currents cleansed mud from her feet. Her once tanned skin acquired a paler hue. Her long hair, darkened by its long immersion, stretched out in lazy strands that drifted and floated like sea anemones, capturing stray petals and the glowing gems of beetle carapaces.

By dawn she was ready, fully rested and adorned. The rays of the sun illuminated the canopy of leaves above her, stole through the cracks and crept steadily across the pool floor until they tentatively brushed a toe. Light inched across her still form and slowly teased limbs into movement.

There were no witnesses to her slow ascent, no crowds to wonder at the regal train of bubbles of celestial light she trailed.

She crested the surface with a barely audible sigh and stared unblinkingly into the morning sun. Like a pre-Raphaelite Ophelia, she floated among the debris; already part of another age, but with a burden of knowledge still to deliver to the present.

## 25: Cameras and peepholes

THE SMELL OF cheap spirits and even cheaper cigarettes hung in the office air like the remnants of a party to which Marc hadn't been invited. His stomach closed around emptiness and his dry mouth had no saliva left to give. He would have felt completely abandoned were it not for the police's assiduous refusal to let him sleep. Whenever his head began to droop, one of them would cross the office and shake his shoulder so roughly it jerked his whole body and exacerbated the chafing sting of the handcuffs.

The clock on the wall told him it was over two hours since he'd discovered Anne's corpse. She'd floated belly-up, half-naked and rimmed with leaves and twigs and dead insects, her face a mask of indifference. Things might have been different if he'd informed the police the moment he spotted her, but Clarissa's screams had felt like an accusation of cowardice. So he'd slithered down the wet grass and clumsily poked the leaf scoop towards her. Its long pole dipped and trembled in the space between them, as though it too were loath to touch the corpse.

Anne responded to the net's soft nudge by rolling over in the water, a disturbed sleeper eager to cling to her dream. The movement revealed the wound and the matted hair at the rear of her skull, the absence no light could fill.

The police had arrived while Marc was still trying to draw the corpse towards the rim of the pool. They trained their guns on him and screamed orders, a savage reveille that spurred the day into chaotic life. The anxiety and fear that had haunted the retreat since Ted's disappearance finally discovered its voice. Birds screeched in the trees. Dishes clattered to the canteen floor and the staff raced out to add their

hysterical voices to the mêlée.

Only Luca had remained calm. He descended halfway down the slope and hurriedly translated the orders for Marc to step away from the pool and lie facedown on the grass with his hands behind his back. He assured him that the police were handcuffing him solely as a precaution. But the longer Marc waited in the office, the more his faith in Luca's judgement ebbed away.

He stared drowsily at the picture wall's forest scene. He tried to imagine himself walking through the cooling shade of the trees, but like virtually everything at the retreat, there was nothing real about their faded colours. Everything here masqueraded as something else, from the concrete moulded to resemble wood to the mosaic's clumsy imitation of antiquity. None of it felt as real as Anne's corpse had. Her face swam before his mind's eye, locked into an accusatory glare that showed how much of a fool he'd been to believe the visions in the pool could ever be real. Their images had spread out before him, a road map to the future where every city was a glittering success. He recalled every detail with a clarity that refused to fade, but their perfection was the clue to their unreality. Everything about them adhered too closely to his most secret desires. He'd looked into the waters and seen the person he longed to become, mistaken his reflected dreams for prophecy.

Reality was different. Reality was Anne's face swimming up constantly before his mind's eye. Reality was the photos of Ted and Patrick staring at him from the wall. Reality was Decebal and Bacovia barging into the office.

Weary of this collection of unruly foreigners, the two detectives made him feel he'd be lucky ever to see England again. They questioned him as though he were an enemy of the state, a prize captive in a civil war between truth and lies, reality and imagination. His words counted for nothing. For them, his every answer

was a stubborn refusal to reveal Ted's whereabouts or the true extent of his complicity in Patrick's murder of the policeman or how Anne's death fitted into the writers' conspiracy to bring chaos to Constanța. They repeated the questions over and over, like a perverse mantra that would force him into revealing the truth. With each repetition, Marc felt his belief that this might yet end happily slip further away.

After more than an hour of repeated questioning, they stood and announced he had five minutes to decide whether to tell the truth or be transferred to a cell in Constanța. The words carried a brutish reality that the pool's dream images had never had. Marc didn't know what to do. He would have lied if he knew it would save him, but, like Patrick before him, fear had stripped him of invention. All he could imagine was the inside of a cell. Years in a foreign prison stretched out before him in a filmic shorthand of clanging doors, brutal guards, and prisoners eager to teach him the true meaning of being an outsider.

Yet when Bacovia returned five minutes later, the reality of the retreat once more proved stranger than his imagination. He expected Decebal to join them but he never came.

—Do you swear you do not know where is Mr Nowakow? she said.

—Yes, he said.

—And Mr Rayner?

—Nothing.

—And you found the body this morning on your way to breakfast?

—Yes.

Bacovia grinned at Marc, reached down and released the handcuffs. She nodded towards the door.

—Then you can go.



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Clarissa was waiting when Marc shuffled into the sunlight. He smiled as she stepped towards him, but it was only what the moment demanded. No sooner had her embrace carried him beyond her sightline than his smile turned to a frown. He knew his face would be set like the guilty partner's in a film, the one who knew too much, but he didn't care. He watched his hands move across her back with the detachment of a scientist observing an experiment. Already he knew he'd do no writing that morning. The leaves had none of the radiance he longed for.

—I thought you were never going to get out, Clarissa said.

—Tell me about it. I still don't know why they let me go.

Clarissa drew back her head and looked at him: —You mean you don't know?

—What? Have they caught someone?

—I mean it was me who told them. I told them you'd been with me all night. I tried to tell them earlier but they wouldn't listen.

—So you're my alibi?

She squinted up at him, as if in search of a different answer: —You don't seem very happy about it.

—No? he said. Of course I'm happy. And thank you, I really am grateful. I'm just tired as well, and hungry, and angry too. It felt like they were going to keep me there until I told them whatever the fuck it was they wanted to hear.

—Exactly! It's like Anne said yesterday. They're not interested in solving the crime. They just want someone to be guilty.

Marc noted with surprise the tears that trickled down her cheeks. Hours ago, he would have been sure they were for him, but the morning had left him cynical and detached. Now he suspected they were for Clarissa herself, for the guilt she

felt. She'd ignored Anne throughout dinner and mimicked her after she'd left, not knowing she was about to die.

Marc was too tired to react to her tears. He pulled her to him and felt her muffled words vibrate against his chest.

—What did you say?

She pulled away and looked at him again. Tears made her eyes shine like a zealot's.

—I said Anne was right.

—What do you mean?

—I mean she was right, about here. She was so sure something was going on, that we should leave. That's why they killed her. She must have discovered something.

—You don't know that, he said. It took all his effort to silence a snide comment about this not being crime fiction, as if Anne's spirit longed to speak through him.

—And you don't know that that isn't what's happening.

—Yesterday you said we should stay calm.

—We hadn't found a dead body yesterday. Anne was right. We can't just stay here like prisoners and wait for the next one of us to be killed.

—Don't exaggerate. Only one person's died.

—You mean only one writer's died. What about the policeman and the waiter? And where are Patrick and Ted?

—Bacovia said they've found Patrick. It's only Ted who's missing.

The pretence of their embrace finally came to an end. Clarissa stepped back and prodded his chest as she spoke, her nail the sharp barb of each question mark:

—But how do we know they're not just saying that? Where are they? For godsake,

Marc, you found a *dead body* this morning. Why the hell aren't you more worried?

—What do you want me to do, Clarissa? I don't know what's happening and I don't know what will. I'm not a fucking prophet. I haven't eaten since last night. I haven't even had a fag. And I've spent all morning in that fucking office with people telling me I'm a murderer. All I want to do now is go to my room and sleep.

—Yeah well, don't forget you'd still be in there if it hadn't been for me.

For an uncomfortably long moment, they stood and stared at each other in silence, strangers who'd exhausted all they had to say. Their eventual embrace was less a reconciliation than an uneasy truce. There was nowhere else for either of them to turn. Anne was dead. Patrick was in custody. Ted was missing.

Clarissa was, Marc knew, painfully correct. He was free only because of her. It wasn't enough to be poor: now he was forever in her debt emotionally too. Even as he muttered an apology, he strained against this new burden. Their argument had inserted a thin wedge of distance between them that persisted in their embrace, an absence so real it could have been solid. Words weren't strong enough to remove it.

Clarissa raised her face from his shoulder. Her eyes were red and puffed, as if their renewed intimacy had prompted an allergic reaction.

—I don't like this place any more, Marc. Can't we go?

—What's the point of saying that? They're not going to give our passports over now, are they? There's been a murder.

—I know they're not going to let us leave Constanța. But can't we at least go for a walk?

—There are police everywhere.

—What can they do? We're not under arrest.

—I'm tired.

—Come on, Marc. We haven't stepped outside the fence for two days.

—Shhh.

—I'm going mad. Please.

—Seriously. Listen.

A heavy rumble approached from the forest. Faint tremors ran through the earth and vibrated up to his inner ear, where they merged with the sound of branches cracking like gunfire. And then the invaders came into view.

Far larger than the East German limousines for which the road had been designed, the media trucks with their high sides of riveted metal plates smashed through the overhanging branches like tanks. Satellite dishes shredded the falling leaves. Cameramen leaned out of the windows, nursing cameras on their shoulders like rocket launchers. They were a mercenary force come to ransack the retreat for news.

A bare-torsoed man leapt from the lead truck while it was still moving. The sun glinted off his mirrored sunglasses and ersatz dog tags as he ran forward and swung the gates open. The vans rumbled past him without pausing, their drivers certain they were welcome anywhere, the true forces of the modern.

At first, Marc felt queasily excited at the approaching media storm. But when he looked more closely at the trucks, he saw only the exotic logos of Romanian television channels, not the familiar ones of the BBC, Sky or CNN. Rather than deliver them back into the real world, their barrage of questions would be the latest escalation in the morning's horror. He'd rather have his tongue cut out than answer another translated question.

—Come on, he said.

—Where?

—Somewhere they're not going to ask us questions. Quick, before the TV

people work out we're the ones who found her.

The TV trucks had grabbed everyone's attention. Young police officers jockeyed for position in the preliminary shots of the pool. The forensic team chose this moment to emerge from the canteen, a crack squad of white-suited phantoms. Their motions seemed deliberately exaggerated. They moved towards the pool as though they already visualised the slow motion replay of their entrance. In the commotion, Marc and Clarissa slipped behind the chalets and found the same fault in the fence through which Ted had escaped the previous night.

The whirling thrill of escape erased their worries and liberated them into a temporary ecstasy. Their argument of only moments before now belonged to an impossibly distant past, when they were both different people. Energy surged into them with the joy of being away from the retreat, away from the police, away from the invading television crews. The retreat could descend into a pantomime of authority; they were actors in a different film.

There was no destination, only movement. The world was new, a wheeling carousel of leaves, sky, and earth. They chased each other between the sun-dappled trees. They splashed through the creek. They scrambled up embankments that crumbled beneath their feet for no other purpose than the pleasure of sliding back down. A chorus of birdsong seemed to follow wherever they went.

As they penetrated deeper into the forest, they spurned the paths. Paths were order. Paths were the silent history of other people, other feet. Marc plunged into the undergrowth, confident Clarissa would follow. The foliage was so thick he ran by hopping from one foot to another, like a lifeguard running out into the sea. He imagined himself the muscular hero the girls longed would rescue them from the roaring waves; the one they hoped would seduce them and tug them back to glittering life from the undertow of dreary existence.

—Marc! Marc!

Clarissa's call segued into his reverie. He pressed further into the swells of vegetation. Even when he heard his name again and turned to see her theatrical collapse to the floor, he believed she was complicit in his daydream. He knew the script: exhausted by the chase, she would lie on the deep mattress of ferns and wait to take him in his arms. They would lie there together, her touch erasing his doubts, her flesh more real than any vision in the pool, her eyes glittering with the truest light of all.

He swaggered towards where she lay. He expected at any moment to hear her giggle, but with that self-control he both envied and admired, she remained silent. She kept her eyes closed. She was so deeply in rôle she didn't flinch when he ran a playful finger across the slice of bare flesh where her t-shirt had ridden up over her stomach, nor respond to his kiss.

More irritated than he wanted to admit, Marc drew away. She was ruining the fantasy. He started to speak, then stopped. He noticed the absolute stillness of her chest and her unnatural pallor. He realised how cold her lips had felt beneath his touch. He saw the snakebite red against the livid skin of her ankle. Its twin punctures were peepholes back into the vision in the pool, a bloody shorthand that explained her absence from the scenes in an instant.

## 26: The descent into hell

RUBBER SOLES SQUEAKED over the vinyl floor. Disinfectant masked the lingering smell of vomit. Fire doors rasped open and closed.

Stooped, slouching figures shuffled towards the plastic bench where Marc sat, their features slowly gaining definition as they neared. In every face he saw the secret knowledge that to enter a hospital, whether as patient or visitor, was to admit helplessness. Cures were never permanent. Doctors could only keep death at a distance temporarily. Some trailed drips on stands behind them. Others ostentatiously jerked limbs, as though seeking his approval of the grubby bandages or the wounds that lay beneath. They moved past and reappeared minutes later, trapped in circuits of a private inferno. They edged closer each time. Their lips mouthed words he couldn't understand; their breath hot on his face.

Marc tried to ignore their inspections. Time after time, he leaned back against the painted brickwork until the dragging undertow of sleep became almost unbearable, then stood until it had passed. The coffee and cigarettes Bacovia had brought him remained untouched. He wouldn't smoke, drink, eat or sleep until he heard Clarissa was okay. Anything else would be a dereliction of duty. Only concentrating would save Clarissa.

Those were the terms of the silent deal he'd made with the gods; terms Marc knew he was failing to keep. He could deal with the physical hardship, but concentrating on Clarissa was beyond him. His mind was too busy. His mind was writing. He had no pen, no paper beyond the worn bank notes in his wallet and the shoddy cardboard of his cigarette packet, but he was writing. He recognised the strange mix of dreamlike trance and heightened perceptions, knew he was mentally

sifting through the day's events, weighing and shifting the elements for the greatest effect. It was what he did every day. He was more a creature of habit than of anything like love.

The day had become a series of episodes in a still unplanned novel. First there'd been his discovery of Anne's corpse. Then he'd staggered into the retreat with Clarissa's body across his arms, a lovers' pieta that had the cameramen scuffling to get the best shot. Even as the police jeep had broken through the media ranks and sped into the forest, he'd noted the sunlight strobing the trees not just as a welcome return of the radiant light that had transfixed him the previous day, but as a detail he could use in the novel he composed as he lived.

This visit to a foreign hospital was the latest chapter. No detail was innocent: each door that opened threatened significance; the shuffling patients became hallucinatory projections of his internal struggles; the smells beneath the disinfectant were truths nobody wished to acknowledge. So he knew there was nothing heroic about his attempt to concentrate on Clarissa. It was exactly what he'd have his character do: a man thinking about thinking, struggling to be the human being the moment demanded.

And the longer Marc sat without news of Clarissa, the more wildly the situation mutated in his imagination. It shifted with the endless possibilities of melodrama. He gave his waiting character a phobia of hospitals. The patient had planned the trip to the forest in order to reveal that she was pregnant, and now he had to choose which life to save. The surgeon was an orphan who saw a striking resemblance to her own face in the patient's; she operated believing the patient a twin sister, abandoned to international adoption after Ceaușescu's fall. The patient woke from the poison-induced coma convinced she was dead. One of the shuffling cretins knew the only way to save her but nobody listened until it was too late.



Marc knew they were ridiculous ideas but he embraced them all. Each new plot strand was a further barrier against the reality that he was waiting and Clarissa was dying. Most importantly, they offered distraction from the fact that her absence from the images in the pool could now be explained. The ordeal of waiting for interrogation that morning had filled him with doubt that he'd ever approach their perfection; her death would renew every image with potential.

But Marc still wanted an ending that would leave everyone happy, satisfied, free of guilt. He tried to force every plot strand he entertained to the same end: a wise old doctor, inured to death by years of communist hardship, broke the habit of a lifetime and smiled as he announced Clarissa's miraculous survival.

The doctor who eventually emerged from the door beside him was female. Marc looked up from her scuffed but practical shoes and saw an angular, high-cheekboned face above the regulation white coat. She wasn't smiling.

—Excuse me, mister?

—Khan, he croaked. It was hours since he'd last spoken; longer still since he'd seen Clarissa.

—Mister Khan. Please. You can go on the room.

—Really?

—Please, she repeated, and ushered him in with a flick of the hand that sent reflected striplights sliding over her blood red nail varnish. Everything are OK now. But do not be very long time.

Marc stepped past her into a small ward where monitors beeped and hummed along the walls. An oxygen mask obscured Clarissa's face. Wires and tubes sprouted from her arms and chest like infant snakes erupting from her flesh. A cannula the size of a Biro refill protruded from her forearm and trailed a drip of colourless liquid. Under the cold striplights, her once tanned skin was drained of all

colour. The phrase deathly pale shot into his mind. He hurriedly dismissed the adverb, as if language could still rescue the situation. She was pale. No more, no less. Not deathly. There could still be a fairy tale ending.

When he leaned down and kissed her clammy brow, a fairytale prince, Clarissa's eyes flickered open, then widened. Her body twisted beneath the constraining bedsheets. The snaking tubes writhed with the energy of her flailing arms until Marc placed his hands on her and made reassuring shushes, an incantation of calm that she responded to only gradually. Feeling her struggle subside, Marc stepped back. She didn't see his weak smile. Her eyes were focussed on her fingers. They clawed at the oxygen mask in panic until Marc pulled it clear of her cracked, blue lips.

—What happened? she said.

There should have been nothing simpler than to recount the day's events. But at each stage of the story Marc wondered if he was getting it right. Already the day felt like it had happened to someone else. He struggled to convey how terror had all but paralysed him when he found her virtually lifeless on the ground, and how relieved he'd been when Miklos had emerged from where he'd been spying on them and lead the way back to the retreat, and how he'd panicked at the way the news crews had formed an almost impenetrable wall of flesh and flash bulbs around them.

He saw everything at a remove. He remembered looking down from the unaccustomed perspective of the 4x4's high seats as camera lenses repeatedly butted the windows like fish probing the perimeters of an aquarium, but the memory felt as remote as a TV news image: an American helicopter jerking away from a Saigon roof and hands desperate to tug it down; hostages fleeing the Iranian embassy; crowds of commuters running shrieking from a cloud of black dust and

falling debris that would soon engulf them all. It was escape as media event. He hadn't been living life, only watching.

This moment he'd longed for in the corridor was proving an ordeal. Besides the effort to narrate the morning's events without painting himself the hero he didn't feel, there was the constant challenge to set his face. He worried his expression would somehow betray how uncanny it felt to be talking to her, now, when he'd been so certain she was dead, or transmit the guilty secret that part of him wished she hadn't survived. Her death had possessed an innate logic; her life confused the prophetic images that had floated in the pool.

Drowsy with morphine, Clarissa turned her head from him before he finished talking. She stared in silence at the monitors and made no response to the hand that worried hers in search of affection. When Marc finished his story, the silence became palpable, a barrier between them. He saw himself through her eyes: a struggling novelist with no currency to offer beyond dreams of success. She'd probably slept with him out of boredom and pity, the natural selection of a confined space. The realisation stung like a reopened wound. Perhaps her absence from his visions had been a subconscious acknowledgement of how ridiculous she found him. He was unwanted here. He turned to leave before he had time to start to hate her. His hand was on the door when her voice stopped him:

—Marc?

—Yes? he asked, keeping his scowling face away from her.

—I want to go home.

He knew without turning that she was fighting back tears. He moulded his face into an expression of care and returned to the bedside. He took her hand and assured her she'd soon be out of the hospital and back at the retreat.

—I'm not talking about the retreat, she said. I want to go *home*.

Home. The word itself was enough to send her into a paroxysm of sobs. She cried as if she'd never see home again. At first she raised her hand to shield her eyes from his gaze, but then she let it drop, too tired to hold it there or to protect him from her distress any longer.

—Come on, he said, It'll be alright. You've only just come round.

—How do you know it'll be alright? Can you see the future?

Marc started guiltily but said nothing.

—Please, Marc. Let's forget about the debate and get on a plane home.

—Shhh, come on, try and relax.

—This doesn't feel right. I just want to get out of here.

—Look what you're doing to the monitors. Your heartbeat—

—I don't care about the monitors. Please, Marc, I'm fine. I just need your help. You don't have to come. But I want to go.

—They've still got our passports, he said, trying not to be offended. He'd saved her life and now she was telling him she'd leave alone. We can't escape across the border on a pair of donkeys, can we? And you've just been bitten by a snake. You need to stay here. You can't go anywhere until you're well again.

He moved to stroke her hand again, but she tore it away and gripped his wrist like someone possessed. The tendons in her neck stood out with the effort; her eyes bulged. The atonal bleep of the monitors grew faster.

—I want to leave, she said, tightening her grip further with each word.

—I can't do anything, he said. He was angry at the sudden infliction of pain and the accusatory flash in her eyes; angry at his inability to forgive her for either. He tried to pull away but Clarissa's grip grew tighter still. When the doctor and a nurse barged into the room, Marc had to prise her rigid fingers from around his wrist one by one before he could obey their orders to move aside.

—Please. You really must go now, the doctor said, raising her voice above the frenetic beeping.

—But—

—Please. It is not good you are here. You must go.

—When can I come back?

—What?

—When can I come back? Return? I'm the only person she knows.

—Yes, but you do not help. You must not return. You must not. Not today.

Please, go. Tomorrow maybe. Not today. Please, everything here is okay, fine. Go.

She pushed him out of the room before he had chance to say goodbye. The door silenced the beeping monitors. He looked at the plastic bench and then down the corridor to the window of sunlight at its end. His anger of moments before had already abated. He felt curiously weightless, free. The doctor had been clear: Clarissa would be fine as long as he didn't return. There was no need for him to wait. He'd kept his side of the silent bargain with fate. Now he could go.

Incomprehensible signs pointed in various directions, a bewildering array of non-choices. Yet the distant window of glowing sunlight rendered language unnecessary. If he headed towards it, he'd reach the exterior, step out into the street with all its noise and exhaust fumes and flashes of sun off hot metal and deliver himself back to life. There was nowhere else to go.

Humming tunelessly and smiling at the prospect of his first smoke in hours, Marc walked away. Entranced by the steadily growing rectangle of light, he barely noticed the first figure that hurried past him in the opposite direction. The second figure was harder to ignore: in his haste, he bumped into Marc. They both stopped but Marc received no apology. The man, a doctor, glared at Marc for a moment, then sprinted past. In the wake of the doctor's footfall, Marc heard for the first time

the blare of an alarm. He somehow felt certain it had been sounding previously.

He hurried on towards the light. The tops of trees were visible now through the window; beyond them the infinite blue of the sea. A ferry moving in the distance looked like a child's toy negotiating the treetops, an object out of its element. Soon he would be out there too, in the air, away from the irritating alarm. Lift doors slid open as he approached the end of the corridor, ready to bear him down to the world. Already he could feel the sun, warm on his face through the glass.

Two figures stepped out of the lift and ran past Marc. One of the passengers placed a hand over the door to hold it open, but Marc didn't move. Where was everyone running? Standing in the sunlight, Marc remembered the promises he'd made to himself. He remembered the doctor's injunction not to return. He remembered her assurances that everything would be fine. There was no reason to believe anything was wrong.

He stepped towards the lift, then glanced back. In the swift movement from bright sunlight to the gloom of the corridor, the afterimage of the lift passengers floated before his vision like ghosts. Through their featureless faces, he saw the light that flashed above a door. Painting the gloom red, it cast the white-coated doctors who rushed beneath it as demons.

Marc sprinted towards the flashing light. His heavy footsteps slapped against the vinyl floor, echoing as if he were chasing himself. The alarm was everywhere, ringing in his skull. Yet when he burst through the forbidden door, into the ward where Clarissa lay hidden beneath a scrum of white coats, he filtered out both the alarm and his heavy, panting breath. The only sound he heard as the doctors manhandled him back into the corridor was the flat tone of the monitors, the final signal of a life no longer there.

## 27: Non-space

MARC RAN, DESPERATE to escape the hospital, desperate to escape the bleeping monitors that hummed like tinnitus in his ears, desperate to escape himself.

A wall of heat hit him as he pushed open a fire exit. The air shimmered above scrubby wasteland at the back of the hospital. Sunlight bounced jaggedly off cars on the road. Leaning against a skip that overflowed with old furniture, he took deep breaths of the air untainted by disinfectant or death, then reached for his cigarette packet.

Something tumbled down the pile of furniture and pinged against the hot metal of the skip. Marc looked up. Several pairs of eyes stared down at him from thin faces that Marc guessed ranged in age from seven to thirteen. They looked impatient for him to move on. An empty Coke can bounced off the rim of the skip, too close to Marc for it to have been an accident. He let his hand drop to his side, shrugged an apology and left. At first he walked, but as stones and old casters began to dance at his feet and send cinders into the air, he forced his tired and empty legs to break into one final run and carry him away from this hostile, unforgiving place.

The children continued to throw things long after Marc had passed out of range. The illusory landscape of their game had vanished. Their imaginations were no longer capable of transforming the abandoned furniture into a fortress. The younger ones climbed aimlessly over the stained mattresses and tinder-dry wood, waiting for something to release them from their boredom.

The oldest boy lit a cigarette he'd stolen from his father. Everybody crowded around him. They watched amused as he held the lighter flame to the mattress on

which he sat, hoping their grinning approval would secure them a drag or two. The boy held the lighter against the mattress for a couple of seconds. He watched the stained fabric scorch, then pulled it away. The flame remained. It tore through to the ticking beneath, spreading as they watched. By the time the children had scrambled to the floor, it was hard to believe the mattress had ever been anything but fire, the grimy fabric stuffed with anything other than crayon-bright orange flames.

The skip sat with oversized dustbins beneath an overhang of peeling wood panelling and stained and crumbling concrete. For years the overhang had been a space with no purpose, neither inside nor out. Now, as the children fled across the weed-spotted cinders, it became a space bright with fire. Flames rose to lick the wood panelling, coaxing the smouldering timber to join their conflagratory surge upwards. Soon flames curled around window frames and sought the ancient timbers of the floors and roof beams. Sirens wailed in lament for what was about to be lost.

The hospital was no longer a hospital, the building no longer a building. It was all a fire waiting to happen.



## 28: Vermilion delta

A DAY OF tormenting visions had left Patrick unable to distinguish the imaginary from the real. The food that was thrust before him crawled with life. Water turned into blood as he raised it to his lips. The doctors who visited spoke with Rachel's voice and all her familiar inflections. Decebal and Bacovia had returned several times, but Bacovia never managed more than a few words before they both began to shrink. Their faces grew rounder and their features strangely flattened. Their noses became beaks and their eyes swelled to black saucers. Feathers sprouted from their skin and their fingers turned to talons. Taking flight, they swooped and circled over his head, the same nightmare owls that tormented Goya's sleeper. The cockroach came and went, its movements listless now Patrick had ceased fighting it. Rachel's ghost offered him comforting embraces, then turned to dust in his arms.

So when the fire spread to the hospital wing in which he was detained, Patrick made no move to escape when he heard alarms ring in the corridor outside and saw the previously locked door click open automatically. Assuming the danger was in his head, he waited for what would follow. He believed himself beyond surprise; he only wished he were beyond terror.

With nowhere in the room to hide, he pressed his back against the wall, straining against it as if he'd pass through into some other realm of safety. He fixed his gaze on the dark line of air between the door and the frame. In his panicked state, it was impossible to know if the space was expanding or static. One moment it dilated; the next it was the sole still point in the world. He sniffed the air for signs of the cockroach's stench. He smelt smoke. He sniffed again, fearful it was an omen of a repeat of the previous night's cinematic vision, a further reel of his

trespasses against Rachel. But this wasn't tobacco smoke. This smoke left an acrid sting in the sinuses that felt invasive and corrupt, real. Something was on fire.

Footsteps thudded dully past his door. They were too heavy for a ghost's, too numerous for an insect. He peered at the open door again. The line of air was a dark perimeter of possibility. If the line was part of his visions, he had only fear to fear. If the line was real, it presented a chance to escape.

Blood prised its way through barricades of stiffness as he stood. Pins and needles exploded in his calves. He'd sat in the same position for hours, trying to alleviate the throbbing pain in his thigh. Now he moved, he realised he'd only been hoarding the pain. The lump smouldered as if already licked by the approaching flames. He hobbled to the door, promising himself he'd see a doctor the minute he left this godforsaken hospital.

The smell of smoke grew stronger. Patrick moved his hand gingerly towards the newly opened darkness around the door. He wouldn't believe it was there until he'd touched the air itself, placed his fingers in this wound in the real. His fingers closed around the door edge, but even as he inched the door towards him, he maintained the other flat against it, ready to slam it closed.

He peeked out at the corridor. There were no flames. No medics or police. No sign of Rachel or the cockroach. There were only patients: abandoned orphans driven to madness long ago, now adults. Row after ragged row of them shuffled past the doorway. A flashing amber light painted their gaunt faces orange and black, Halloween masks that had melded to the skin. Moans of distress merged with the wailing alarm. Some patients pressed hands to their ears and squeezed their heads as if in a vice. Others banged their heads against the walls. Yet some appeared resolutely untroubled. They danced in absurdly slow motion, their limbs swaying to a private music.

The dancing patients reminded Patrick of Goya's dancing lunatics. The last forty-eight hours had reduced the Goya novel he'd been working on to a memory so distant it was unreal, but he clung to the mental connection as proof of his own lingering sanity. He knew none of those images of suffering he'd pored over in catalogues and lingered before in museums equated with the pain before him now, but that didn't matter. He welcomed their sordid reality as something beyond art. Paint could never capture the fear in the eyes of the man who leant against a wall masturbating or words evoke the whimpering shame of the woman whose face begged for someone to take the turd from her outstretched hands. There was something about the scene before him that was more horrifying than any of the visions that he'd suffered alone in the cell. This was so monstrous it could only be real.

He stepped into the sluggish wave of bodies. Nobody appeared to notice. Their empty, glassy eyes stared ahead through veils of endless sedation. Progress was slow. With limbs emaciated through years of inactivity and scarred with pustular bedsores, the patients tottered forwards as if learning to walk again. The combined stench of their body odour and soiled nightgowns was astringent as smelling salts, but Patrick couldn't risk returning to his cell and waiting until they'd all passed: when he turned and squinted over their heads, it was impossible to tell whether the dark shapes flickering along the walls behind them were shadows or the first curling wisps of smoke.

Wary of the arms that might flail against the throbbing lump at any moment, Patrick picked his way between the patients as through a minefield. He had no idea where they were headed. Unconscious when Decebal and his cronies had brought him here, he lacked even the thread of memory to guide him out of this nightmare labyrinth. He could only follow the flow of the crowd and hope they weren't

leading him into the flames. But then, through a gap in the press of bodies, he caught a blurred glimpse of a door at the end of the impossibly long corridor. Beyond the door, the unmistakable dazzle of sunlight. Out of the darkness, light. The world had never looked so radiant.

The prospect of escape released a surge of adrenaline that dulled the pain in his thigh enough for Patrick to increase his pace slightly. His mind ran further ahead: once out of the hospital, he'd hobble straight to the train station and force his way onto the next train to Bucharest and the safety of the embassy. A doctor could lance the lump and inject enough tranquiliser for him not to wake again until he'd safely returned to Manchester. At home, there'd be no cockroaches. Rachel's ghost would be the empty space on her side of the bed. Monsters would lie within the shackles of his dreams.

One of the patients lurched sideways. The brief, unexpected collision shattered Patrick's fragile daydream. He cried out with pain and stopped to clutch his leg. Other patients jarred into him from behind, then bounced into one another. Someone tripped. Someone fell. Someone screamed. Patrick felt his legs buckle. He hit the floor. Body after body buried his, a fleshy grave. Wherever he turned, limbs blocked his path. He thrashed around beneath the bodies in terror and in pain, sure the fire was already upon them, creeping up from the floor below. But when he finally tunnelled free of the flailing arms and legs and righted his mangled spectacles on his nose, a different horror to the imagined inferno awaited him.

Staring through an open doorway into a ward, Patrick understood why he'd seen only patients in the corridor and not doctors or nurses. Knowledge was worse than ignorance. One of the doctors who'd visited him earlier sat slumped against a wall. His head lolled at a right angle to his neck in exaggeratedly attentive deference to the female colleague beside him. The metal handle of a scalpel

protruded from the woman's eye; a vermilion delta snaked down her face and neck and stained her uniform with a shiny bib of blood.

Patrick struggled to his feet, anxious to put distance between himself and this terrible vision. Something caught his eye. A nurse he'd assumed was dead lay on the floor near the two doctors. A spasmodic jerk rippled through her limbs. Her arm slithered across the bloody floor in search of something. Patrick looked down the corridor. There was no sign of help approaching.

While the other patients who'd fallen tottered woozily to their feet and headed towards the light, Patrick stepped into the ward. Sweet with blood, the air bore a sour undercurrent of shit that grew stronger as he crossed to the nurse. He searched his mind for words whose tone alone would be enough to transmit his sorrow and sympathy. Nothing came. Childhood prayers lay in scattered fragments in his memory, incapable of curing the bright bubbles of blood that formed and popped at the lips of the deep slash across the young woman's throat. Anything he said would be a lie. Words would save no one. But his feet refused to move to the door. He was haunted by the memory of how Rachel had looked when he found her dead in the hospice. He couldn't let another woman die alone.

Clumsily, he knelt beside her. The movement made the pain in his thigh more intense than ever before. He closed his eyes and waited until the dizzying vertigo had passed. He looked down at the nurse. It was obvious she was going to die, but he longed to guide her to a final moment of peace. He stretched out his hand to calm her fruitless scrabbling. At his touch, her movements became more desperate. She struggled weakly as he grasped her hand, tried to yank it free. The blood bubbled at her throat more violently, then spurted forth in a thin fountain. She wrenched her head around to look at Patrick. Her eyes flashed with something that could have been terror or warning, and then her jerking body fell still.

Still half-dazed with pain, Patrick reached down and closed her eyelids. The act was familiar from a hundred deathbed scenes, but it was more to protect himself from that final gaze than to be respectful. Her hand remained in his. He placed it gently on the blood-smeared crucifix that trailed loosely around her neck and stood to leave.

Something groaned loudly behind him. Patrick turned and saw a shifting mass of naked limbs, a multi-headed monster of abandon. It filled one half of the ward. Its pale skin was streaked with blood and shit, piss and semen. It was an orgiastic phantasm, a thing alive with touching, sucking, licking, fucking. Details surfaced briefly, then disappeared again in the tumultuous movement. Shoulders sprouted new heads. Knees developed eyes. Arseholes pullulated fingers. Mouths hogging patches of flesh snapped at intruders. Fingers fists cocks jostled for position like piglets avid for the teat. Two grinning women suspended a barely adult male upside down and held his legs apart while an older man buggered him joylessly. A woman fellating a patient masturbated his companion with one hand while lazily stuffing scattered pills and capsules from the floor into her vagina with the other.

Convulsed by an uncontrollable urge to vomit, Patrick hunched over. Strangled cries leaked from his throat, followed by acidic yellow bile that left him feeling as if a stiletto had pierced his liver. He was woozy with pain, sick with other people's suffering. He had to get out. But out of the corner of his eye, he noticed a new stillness, a sudden absence of movement. Slowly, he raised his head and looked. Eyes peered back at him from between legs. Heads popped up on impossibly long necks like cartoon antennae. Urethras squinted blindly. Everyone stared at him. Nobody smiled.

As the limbs and bodies unfolded Patrick glanced back at the dead nurse and

finally understood her fear when he'd touched her. It was his last moment of empathy.

There was no time to run. Naked women circled and closed around him as if he was a totem of flesh. Hands ripped at his clothing, clutched at his arm, wrenched his glasses from his face. He tried to pull away from the clawing nails but there were too many of them. Each movement away from one attack brought him closer to another. When he yelled for help, he had to bite down on the fingers that invaded his mouth and yanked on his teeth. When he kicked out, they caught his legs and, like Gago and Miklos the day before, lifted him up and dropped him jarringly to the floor.

Gasping for breath, Patrick tried to curl into a protective ball. There were too many bodies for him to move, too many hands tearing and pulling, too many nails clawing and gouging. It was an attack of excess. It was the cold air and their hot breath on his skin. It was the strain of ligaments and sockets against savagely tugging hands. It was the deep shame of the excremental flurry that escaped him in his fear. It was the teeth sharp on his ear and the slow, audible tear of his own flesh. It was the white-hot pain as fingers and nails picked and gouged at the lump on his thigh until it burst.

Patrick screamed. He dragged his head free and saw fingers tear something rectangular from his leg. Its edges pulsed with green light. In the frenzy of killing him, the lunatic women cast it aside. The thing slid across the blood-greased floor and came to rest under one of the beds. The approaching flames would consume it, but Patrick had seen what it was. Through eyes half-blinded by tears and the loss of his glasses, Patrick could still recognize a book. He closed his eyes against the sea of grotesque faces above him. The book's pages fell open in the darkness. Text spread across them in luminescent green ink, devouring the empty space in time to

the frenzied clack and rattle of keys that grew louder and louder in his ears, typing him to his end.



## **29: Constanța pastoral**

IN THE FOREST, Ted burst into a clearing. Nature fled from his transformed body. Fear flung birds into the darkening sky. Rodents burrowed beneath scattered leaves. Insects swarmed over tree trunks in random patterns, not knowing whether up or down would provide the greatest refuge.

Ted's eyes held a pale reflection of the evening sky above. Opaque screens, they gave no clues to any thoughts that lay within. They showed no trace of remorse for the people he'd killed, no memories of the family he'd left behind, no knowledge that, beyond the forest, cars were speeding down distant roads, washing machines entering their final spin cycle and satellites bouncing a Babel of voices back to earth.

They showed only the world around him. There was only here. Only now.

### **30: Catastrophe tourism**

MARC WITHDREW AS much money as the first cashpoint he passed would give him, then stepped into the next bar he found. Full of silent workmen in overalls hunched over the zinc tables as they nursed their drinks and cigarettes, the bar looked the perfect place to forget himself. A neon sign above the bar advertised Silva beer; its buzzing light cast the ranked bottles of translucent spirits the candy pink of childhood medicine and promised a cure for his disordered mind.

Marc sat down and gestured a waiter across with a blue and gold hundred-lei note. Soon his mouth was greasy with ham and cheese and dark, bitter bread, and he only needed to nod to the waiter for another cold bottle of beer to arrive, dripping with condensation, the glass sweating in the heat.

Content to erase all spectre of thought from his head, he stared at the television in the corner. He watched a documentary on farming, a dubbed American sitcom, a gameshow whose prize he couldn't guess and a programme that mixed music videos with footage of sports cars speeding along country roads. Adverts interrupted the images at regular intervals. The names were a return to the familiar world: Coke Heineken Peugeot Dell Panasonic Nivea Ford Kinder Jack Daniels Armani BMW Chanel Nokia Colgate Sony Apple. There were adverts for holidays on airbrushed beaches, adverts for credit cards, adverts for apartments that existed only in architects' plans. The life they offered was as fantastical as the images he'd wondered at in the pool, a world forever distant from the room that awaited him in London. But he watched uncritically, happy to lose himself in their false promise. Then the news came on.

A helicopter shot of a burning building replaced the newsreader's face. The

subtitle said Constanța. Marc recognised the hospital he'd left only hours before. Orange flames curled along the length of the roof like the doodles of a child god. A shot of the retreat followed, then old author photos of Ted and Patrick and Anne. When no image of Clarissa followed, he thought for a moment she might still be alive. But he'd seen the monitors with their flat lines. He'd seen her body deathly still. He'd looked in the faces of doctors who'd already given up hope. There was a reason her face hadn't appeared. The news would have been lost in the flames, her death one of hundreds, maybe more. He paid his bill and hurried out into the street.

A deep quiet swallowed Marc as he closed the bar door. The humid night air stank so sharply of burning it rendered the lingering taste of beer on his breath sour, almost poisonous. Thick palls of black smoke hung overhead, replicas of the storm clouds of previous days. Cars lay dull and speckled with smuts. Nothing moved. He felt as though he were stepping out into a post-apocalyptic world, all his worries dwarfed by some greater catastrophe. Apartment blocks on either side formed a looming canyon of dark concrete relieved by the occasional squares of illuminated windows.

Marc headed for the seafront. Something about the water promised the significance Clarissa's death demanded he find. Its emptiness offered escape from the streetwide saturation of advertisements and the construction sites where building after building rose, the skin of a new future grafted onto the old city.

Clarissa's pleading face surfaced from memory as he walked, still wanting something he couldn't give. He shook his head as though the movement could dislodge his guilt. In an attempt to reassert his independence from her imagined ghost he lit a cigarette, more because he knew she'd have disapproved than from any real desire to smoke.

He tried to concentrate on nothing more than putting one foot in front of the

other, but his neck prickled with the uneasy sensation of being watched. He stopped and scanned the windows above for staring faces. He peered into the thick shadows between the buildings for signs of movement. There was nothing there. Yet the sense of unease shadowed him all the way to the front. The echo of his footsteps down the otherwise silent street seemed to fall marginally out of synch with his actual stride, the gap between them only increasing when he jogged the last few metres.

On the promenade, life continued as if nothing had happened. Teenagers ambled past in garishly logoed tracksuits and trainers, tinny music leaking out of their mobile phones. Ostentatious yachts bobbed up and down in the marina, their masts bars across the horizon. It was the same world. Clarissa's death had made no difference. It couldn't put food in the mouth of the tramp rifling through the bins nor airbrush a single piece of litter from the beach that stretched out beneath him. He had to escape it all. He walked along the deserted harbour wall, out towards the sea that yielded no images, no meaning.

The water was a petrol-coloured mirror of the smoke-filled sky, its dark surface barely troubled by the listless waves. To stare towards the horizon and the thin strip of blue beneath the rolling clouds of smoke was to see the earth as a Rothko painting: fields of colour floated and merged into one another, their uneven outlines glowing with traces of the dying sun's delicate, golden light.

Tiredness finally overcame Marc as he looked out. He felt his sense of self slowly evaporate, a vertiginous emptiness. He had to clutch the railing to stop himself toppling into the sea. Shaky, he turned from the empty horizon and looked over the beach, past the funfair to where the concrete hotels and gaudy lights of Mamaia scarred the vista.

Luca had claimed Mamaia was Romania's premier resort and organised an

excursion there in the first week. All five writers had pressed into the uncomfortable proximity of one of the cable cars whose passage across the evening sky he watched now. At this distance their movement was impossibly slow. He remembered how small Constanța had looked. Someone could sit there now and watch the whole city burn to the ground and it would be no more real than on a cinema screen. With the distance, nothing mattered. With the distance, he'd be one more tiny figure, unmarked by the discovery of a dead body. With the distance, he'd be innocent of leading Clarissa into the forest.

The sea slapped soft against the harbour wall. Marc looked down to the sheet of water. There was no reflection of his face staring down. The water promised oblivion, a thin skin above the abyss. Half-drunk on beer and self-pity, he wondered what would happen if he threw himself in. There'd be no Clarissa to save him this time. How long would it take before he lost consciousness and closed his eyes to whatever visions lay beneath the waves? How long before his name swelled the list of the dead? Anne and Clarissa, perhaps Ted too. His photo would be flashed on the TV news as one of a sequence, its meaning lost in the saturation of images. Is that what was meant to happen? Had he come here to Romania not for words of praise from Patrick or Ted but to realise how little words meant to the world?

He frowned at the waves and willed them to turn into the screen of yesterday and provide an answer. There was nothing. Marc closed his eyes and felt his head droop towards sleep. Anne's body floated up from the darkness. Facedown at first, her corpse revolved with terrible slowness to reveal Clarissa's face.

Marc started. He looked around him and realised a tourist couple had followed him along the harbour wall. They watched him warily, apparently uncertain why anyone would be here alone. The man preferred to extend his arm

and awkwardly take a shot of the two of them pressed together than entrust the camera to Marc. The camera flash bleached their faces twice, then they inspected the screen and hurried away without once looking back, as if any further sight of Marc would taint the image they'd just captured.

Marc lit a cigarette and watched their movement towards the shore. They'd long disappeared from sight by the time he flicked the butt into the water. It floated for a moment, then sank without a ripple. The first reflections of the streetlights lay like comet trails across the wave-wrinkled water. Seagulls wheeled above him. The incoming tide was darkening the sand. A young girl stood and laughed as the cold waves lapped at her feet. The last of the sunbathers called to each other and picked their way through the sunbeds on the beach. Traffic passed along the boulevard beyond them.

A quiet joy overcame Marc. He felt released. The world had never made more sense to him; he'd never felt more certain of his place within it. Clarissa's death hadn't cursed him. He saw the world with the same heightened perception as when she'd dragged him from the pool. Drama lay within every arm that rose, every head that turned, every mouth that smiled. Seeing it like this was a gift, a glimpse of the extraordinary in the ordinary. It was his task to write it.

He began to walk back. He had no idea where the retreat was but assumed that somewhere on the front he'd find a taxi with a driver who knew how to get there. Taxis were a luxury he never allowed himself at home but his wallet was thick with the lei he'd withdrawn earlier and there was little point economising when the trip was almost over. In two days' time he'd be back in London, back to the familiar routines of walking and cycling everywhere to save money, back to the confines of the room and the life that had threatened to stretch before him forever. But none of that mattered now. For too long he'd believed only other people could

save him, never trusting fully that the means lay within himself.

When he reached the front he stood on the kerbside and stuck out his thumb at the passing cabs. An engine roared into life behind him. Headlights sent his shadow sliding across the pavement as they approached against the traffic. Cars sounded their horns and veered into the opposite lane. Marc remembered the warnings he'd read on internet forums about kidnappings and racist attacks and gangs who killed for next to nothing. He stopped trying to hail a cab and broke into a run, but a black jeep was already alongside him. Its electric window glided down with a sinister buzz.

Bacovia called his name twice before he stopped.

Marc had climbed obediently into the jeep, but as they sped past the final streetlights he wished he'd stayed in town. His newfound confidence had evaporated. With the windows tightly closed, the exhausted air in the jeep was so heavy with Bacovia's perfume and Miklos's stale sweat that it could have formed part of a plan to leave him weak, disoriented and defenceless, ready to tell them anything now he no longer had Clarissa's alibi for protection. The jeep pitched along the potholed roads like a boat on a rough sea. He looked back at the lights of Constanța and felt they were a harbour he'd never see again.

Bacovia claimed they only wanted to ensure he was safe, but Marc was sure they'd tracked him down because they had no better suspect. The morning's interrogation had been a rehearsal. Decebal would be waiting in the office, ready for a command performance beneath the striplights. They had to find someone guilty and he was the last one left. He knew better than to believe Bacovia when everything she said was so clearly a lie. It didn't matter to her that he'd seen the flatlined monitors or the TV pictures: when they'd slowed to inspect the still

smouldering ruins of the hospital, catastrophe tourists, she still claimed she didn't know whether Clarissa was dead even as they saw the rows of blackened corpses on stretchers.

Marc leaned his head against the cool glass of the window as the jeep turned off the highway and began to jolt and bounce over the rutted forest track. His hand hovered near the door handle. Memories of films flickered through his head. There came a time when every hero realised the authorities were the last people he should trust. The jeep was moving slowly enough for him to leap out without dying. In the initial confusion he'd gain valuable time, perhaps enough to melt into the darkness and hide until daybreak. But then what would he do? where would he go?

He looked out into the night. In the darkness, the trees of the forest were virtually indistinguishable, solids reduced to air. Somewhere out there, he'd run together with Clarissa. They'd fooled themselves that speed and laughter would set them free, but her release had been different, a double death in the hospital. The doctors who'd tried to revive her would have fled at the onset of the flames. The living didn't save the dead. The fire would have reduced her to smoke and a heap of ashes, a smouldering corpse at best. The flames would have scorched her beautiful flesh, lifted shreds of skin in the hot eddy of their passing. So particles of Clarissa could have been floating above them now, riding the thermals above the treetops in their new freedom.

Marc moved his hand back to his thigh. He was going nowhere. He was exhausted. The bump of the jeep over the track lulled him towards sleep. In his tired mind, he floated once more within a glowing cathedral of light. Clarissa's ghost swam among the spectral masques. Wearing her bikini, her skin untouched by fire, she came towards him. He smiled at her, happy that she was here, but when she opened her mouth to call his name, a beam of light shot forth, almost blinding.



He jerked his head away from the window. An electric shiver of fear coursed through him. He felt sure something had moved in the forest. A blur of light springing forth from the vision of Clarissa's mouth. He'd had no time to study it, but in the absence of a clear image his subconscious rushed to fill in the blanks. Not believing in ghosts didn't mean he wasn't scared of them. The blur had radiated uncanny light. He looked at Bacovia and Miklos. Their faces spectral in the dashboard light, they chattered between themselves above the hum of police voices on the radio. They'd seen nothing.

Marc cupped his hands around his eyes to shield them from the faint interior light of the jeep and moved his forehead back to the window. His heart drummed against his ribs. He scanned the trees at the side of the track. Seeing nothing, he forced himself to smile at his own fears. Clarissa's ghost was not, after all, rushing ahead of them to prepare an intimate haunting. He sat back against the seat and told himself there were more pressing concerns. Decebal would be ready by now, armed with questions. There was no time to worry about ghosts. He had to stop believing everything he saw was real.

The blur reappeared, darting in from the left, ahead of the jeep. Bacovia screamed. The jeep skewed wildly to the right. It hit something and jolted free of the earth. Hurling against the door pillar, Marc glimpsed a creature that was half-man, half-beast. It flickered with light. Then all he could see was the tree trunks that sped and span towards the windscreen at impossible angles in the headlights.

### 31: Creative destruction

A HAND SHOOK Marc's shoulder. His head rocked loosely with each clumsy tug. It felt connected to his neck by the flimsiest of strings. For a moment, all he could feel was pain. And then fear. He remembered something moving in the trees. He tried to pull away from the hand that still pawed him, but there was no room to move.

—Help! he moaned. Help!

—Quiet! Please.

The hand fell from his shoulder.

—Bacovia?

—Yes.

—What happened?

—An accident. Please, we must hurry. You need get out. It is very dangerous.

The jeep lay on its roof. Sprawled upside down, Marc had to drag his body along the ceiling before he could crawl out of the door. The ground was soft and spongy beneath his palms, a mattress. He wanted to lie there and watch the insects swirl hypnotically in the headlights but Bacovia was already yanking him to his feet.

—Come. We have to go.

—What about Miklos?

—Dead. Take this, she said, and thrust the shocking weight of a pistol into his hand. Its butt was warm and tacky with blood.

—Dead?

— You do not see this?

Marc looked to where she angrily pointed. In the faint reflection of the headlights off the scarred trees, Miklos's decapitated, awkwardly twisted body had thrust through the shattered windscreen. His hands lay on the ground in blind search for his missing head among the scattered jewels of windscreen fragments. Marc swooned, overcome by the sight and the hot exhaust fumes, but Bacovia grabbed him by the elbow and pulled him towards the trees before he could topple to the ground.

— What happened? Marc said

— Come, she said. We talk later.

— Where are we going?

— Away from here. The camp is close. There are more police.

— Can't you phone them? Or radio them and get a car?

— The radio is broken. I have tried my phone, but nothing.

— There never is here.

— Please, Bacovia hissed. We must be quiet.

— Sorry, Marc whispered. He followed her in silence, out of the headlights' protective glow. He thought peevishly that neither of them was the survivor the other would have wished for. Miklos had been all power, all muscle, all strength. Neither Marc's imagination nor Bacovia's English would protect them from an attack.

No starlight filtered through the thick veil of smoke and clouds; they navigated more by the strip of shifting sky above the track than by anything visible on the ground. But the darkness failed to conceal Bacovia's pain: the barely discernible blob of her silhouette listed to one side with each of her steps. Despite Marc's own slow and halting movements, he bumped into her three times in the

darkness before he managed to regulate his speed to hers. The further they walked, the more Bacovia's breathing grew laboured. He wondered how much longer she could last. His recollection of what he'd seen in the forest before the crash was hazy, but whatever it had been, he was beginning to suspect that he was somehow fated to face it alone.

—Are you sure we're going the right way? he said.

—Yes, I am sure.

—We've been walking for ages.

—We will find it.

—That doesn't mean you know which way we're going.

—If you want to go the other way, go. Probably I am safer without you.

—What do you mean? You think this is my fault?

Bacovia stopped and turned to him. She was invisible in the darkness, but her breath was hot and garlicky on his face as she spoke: —Do you not think it is strange? We never have troubles in Constanța, but with you writers there is trouble every night. Yesterday writers talk of monsters. Today writers die.

—Who talked about monsters? Anne?

—And Patrick.

—And you think that's what we saw in the forest? when we had the accident? You think there's a monster coming after us?

—I do not know.

—Don't lie to me. What was it?

—I do not know and I do not want to know. Come.

They stumbled on. It began to rain. With each bend they rounded, Marc hoped to see the retreat, but no fragile dome of light rose above the treetops to relieve their fear. His shoulder burned where it had slammed into the door pillar,

and his arm ached from the weight of the gun. Each time he stumbled on a rut, it felt as though someone were taking a claw hammer to his knee ligaments. His jaw ached from the struggle to remain silent. He longed for a cigarette, but knew the smell would advertise their presence even more than their combined sweat and blood and fear. Every crack of a twig, rustle of the branches in the breeze or pock of rain on the leaves was a potential attack. Bacovia twice shot blindly into the darkness, leaving the afterimage of her pistol flare to float and effloresce before his vision, its sound to ring in his ears.

But finally, as if brought into reality by the weight of their desperation, they heard the low thrum of a generator. Outlined by weak, still distant lights, the silhouettes of the serried ranks of trees a cage from which they would soon escape.

Marc lit a cigarette and turned to Bacovia with the smile of a conspirator in survival. She ignored him. She was already limping towards the last bend in the track. A large patch of blood showed dark brown against the back of her grey trousers. Marc's smile died on his lips. The light through the trees was before them; Bacovia's back should have remained in darkness. Instead, it glowed brighter and brighter with approaching light. His stomach was hollow with fear. He tried to remember what he'd glimpsed before the crash. All he could recall was a blur of light, a naked body, something flickering in the headlights. But then Ted appeared and rendered memory unnecessary.

Bacovia turned at the drum of heavy feet and squinted into the light. She had time to half-raise her pistol but not to fire before Ted's horn skewered her sternum. The force of the impact lifted her off her feet. Her arms flailed helplessly in the air, sending wild shadows cartwheeling over the trees as Ted plunged with her into the undergrowth.

Stunned, Marc stood and stared before him as though waiting for the scene

to repeat itself and offer an explanation. A crown of insects flitted around his head. The cigarette burned unnoticed in his fingers. He felt the heft of Miklos's gun in his hand. It wouldn't save Bacovia. It might not save him. He looked towards where the creature and Bacovia had disappeared. A tunnel of leaves burned with light. Their brightness concealed whatever lay at their core.

Marc flung the cigarette into the ferns and ran. The gun tugged painfully at his arm, tempting him to throw it after the cigarette as though its weight were all that hindered his progress. But Marc knew it wasn't the gun that slowed him down. Running was almost as habitual as writing, but tonight his cold and bruised limbs were actors that had forgotten their lines. Tired and sluggish, they resisted every command to go faster. It felt like he was running in a heavy overcoat a couple of sizes too small: a simile he couldn't shrug off, it constrained his every movement. And the rough track tripped him twice before he rounded the bend. Each time he fell, he looked in panic behind him: the glowing leaves were all he saw. Nothing pursued him yet.

State Hunting Lodge #1 appeared before him. Its low huddle of chalets and its motley array of statues were bathed in a welcoming soft blue light, an almost homely phosphorescence. Marc staggered past the gatepost's silhouetted herm and wanted to cry out with relief. He let the generator's comforting thrum fill his ears. He traced with tired eyes the dark tracks of mud the TV crews had churned up hours before and wondered what had been so terrible about their arrival that he and Clarissa had chosen to flee. The tracks were all that remained of the trucks. The news had shifted elsewhere, to the hospital, but Marc suspected they'd be back again soon and he wanted to be alive to see it. The administration block lay beyond the pool. Its windows were rectangles of darkness, but a row of police cars sat parked beneath it, their glistening bonnets holding a dull sheen of reflected light.

Someone was here.

Still clutching the gun, Marc stumbled past the first of the empty chalets and called for help. The administration block remained in darkness. He called for help again, louder this time. The darkness didn't answer.

By now, he was approaching the statues along the rim of the pool's amphitheatre. He shuddered at the memory of the statue he'd thought was clutching at his chest three nights before. So much had happened since then. The need to explain the apparition had been forgotten in the rush of love and death and stranger visions still. But he regarded the statues warily as he neared them. Where the previous afternoon light had dappled them with illusory movement, tonight they were still. The first of the statues was a barely pubescent nymph. The only shadow that moved across her was his own: comically gun-toting, growing larger and larger, cast by an impossible source.

Marc felt heat on his back. He flung himself to the side and hit the ground at the same moment Ted's head cannoned into the nymph. The statue exploded. Plaster of Paris shrapnel fell on Marc as he scrambled to his feet.

Coughing and choking on the dust, he ran forwards blindly. His feet sought ground that took a moment longer than expected to appear. He landed on the slithery turf with his entire body weight concentrated on his injured knee and immediately lost his footing. Crippling pain jolted up his leg, then returned redoubled with each revolution of his body. As though this was a drama he was doomed to repeat, he tumbled down the vertiginous slope towards the pool again. Earth and sky slid over one another. The pistol flew from his hand. His fingers alternately clawed at the air then bent at painful angles beneath him as he tried to slow his momentum, increasingly aware with each dizzying revolution that the pool had been drained and no phosphorescent water waited to break his fall.

The pool's concrete rim saved him. The crack of his bones against it echoed around the amphitheatre and mingled with his cry of pain. Rough and uncomfortable beneath his badly grazed back, the concrete was a sacrificial altar on which he lay groaning, the imminent victim. One arm dangled limply in space below him; the other fumbled weakly in the wet grass in search of the pistol that wasn't there.

Marc raised his head and looked down at the pool. Drained of water, it was an unnatural space, a tiled room plunged into the ground. The phosphorescent glow he'd seen emanated from a klieg light that stood on the tiled floor. Powered by a mini generator, it cast the grass above him a deep bottle green, as if he'd plummeted into a richly dyed image from a Sunday supplement or an old tourist brochure. Its unforgiving blue light showed the mosaics of the canted floor in all their cracked and stained shoddiness. There were no visions to rescue him from what was coming.

Marc heard a brief toot like the sound of a cheap kazoo. He looked back to the rim of the amphitheatre. Ted hunkered down on all fours among the statues. Rain glittered around him in pale light. With his lips and snout smeared with blood, he stared into the emptied pool as if searching for something forever lost.

Marc recognised Ted only as the spectral blur he'd glimpsed first from the car, then seen again as it had carried Bacovia to her death. The luminous skin and the blade of light that speared majestically from the forehead were a nightmare that had seeped into the real. Words rebounded around Marc's skull, collided and jostled in the race to give the thing a name, meaning. The only word Marc could think of was *monster*.

Ted now looked directly at Marc. His eyes glittered emptily. His heavy jowls shivered as he growled. His tail swished through the air, a whip of light. He



formed his lips into a trumpet, raised his head to the rain and emitted one more kazoo toot. Then he charged down the slope.

There was only one place to go. Marc rolled to the side, swung his legs over the rim, gripped the concrete with aching fingers and let himself over the edge. His weight tore his fingers from the rim before he was ready. He dropped eight feet and splashed into a puddle that failed to cushion his fall. He crumpled to the floor. His palms smacked painfully into the ragged edged tiles. He was sure his knee was damaged beyond repair, but he was still alive, and he'd spotted the gun. It lay several feet ahead of him, floating atop the painted waters of Narcissus' pool, its barrel glinting in the blue light.

Marc picked himself up and gimped towards it. The light on the tiled walls glowed brighter, erasing all shadow as his hand closed around the pistol grip. The air was suddenly warm. He turned to see Ted. He'd landed in the pool so softly Marc hadn't heard. His naked, wrinkled, warty skin pulsed with light. He stood on his hind legs and walked forwards, his erect penis jutting towards Marc.

Marc raised the bloody pistol. His finger was already depressing the trigger but, to his surprise, the monster stopped and held out something neither wholly hand nor hoof in an apparent appeal for calm. The hard glitter in its eyes softened. Its bloodstained snout formed into a sorrowful moue. It seemed to be using every human trick in its armoury to invite pity and delay the moment when Marc would fire the gun.

—Stay there! Marc commanded.

Ted ignored him. The closer he sidled towards Marc, the more his dank scent evoked unpleasant memories of the smell that haunted the rooms in the abandoned asylum in London. It was as if – after all his hopes for what he'd achieve – his real, unwanted future had come to claim him, not the visions of the

pool but this ragged beast.

—I said stay there!

Ted kept coming. He stretched out both his arms in a protestation of innocence. And then he spoke. His voice still bore a recognisably American growl. He said: —Marc, buddy, help. It's me.

Marc fired the gun. The muzzle flared bright as a flashbulb and captured Ted in a snapshot of shock. The recoil almost wrenched Marc's shoulder from its socket. The blast caromed around the amphitheatre of the pool. Its echo still sounded when Marc fired the second and third shots, so it was barely possible to know what was the original and what its double. He only knew he'd hit the monster.

Ted stumbled forwards. Beneath the reverb of the gunshot, Marc heard him speak again, this hideous future still desperate to claim him.

—Help me, buddy. Help me.

Marc hobbled back, steadied his hand, and fired again.

Ted staggered backwards beneath the impact. He collided with the klieg light and sent it toppling to smash against the tiles in a flurry of sparks. Ted fell with it. He lay for a moment, then slowly disentangled his legs from the metal stand and picked himself up, the pool's only remaining source of light.

The new darkness revealed what the klieg light had hidden: Ted's wounds bore a more intense version of the light that played along his skin. They projected images that played over the tiled walls in the faded colours of super8 home movies. Scenes tumbled over one another with increasing rapidity. Some were newsreel footage, the mythology of a century. Men jerked over trench tops. Crowds stuttered down a St Petersburg Street. Planes dropped bomb after bomb on already burning cities. Soldiers stood beside stacks of skeletal corpses. A mushroom cloud rose into

the air. Starving men broke stones in a blizzard. A naked girl ran crying down a jungle road. Endless rows of skulls piled one on top of the other stared out from empty eye sockets. Crowds danced atop the Berlin Wall. Tanks fired at teenage boys armed with catapults and stones. A plane passed into the side of the World Trade Center and blossomed into a rose of flame.

Others were more intimate scenes Marc felt he recognised, though he had no idea how. A man ran down the stairwell of a shabby apartment block and out into the New York night. A couple embraced on a subway platform. A woman stood weeping over a supermarket trolley. A man held his arms out to catch falling snow. Small boys stood outside a bakery, warming their hands on the extractor fan.

Ted moved towards him once more. Whether it was the continued pleading look in his eye or the humanity of the images scrolling across the walls, something made Marc lower the gun. Ted's head lurched to the side as he did so. The hard glitter returned to his eyes. He looked at Marc with clear hatred. He opened his mouth not to speak but to bellow with rage. The air bubbled and rippled before his mouth. The images ceased scrolling over the tiled walls. The dead leaves scattered around the pool floor burnt with light. Above the rim of the amphitheatre, the treetops glowed incandescent in response, so bright that for one brief moment it was day though the night sky remained black.

Marc squinted against the glare. Raising his hand to shield his eyes, he saw the bones of his fingers as if in an X-ray. He fired blindly before him.

Ted crumpled to the pool floor.

Marc hobbled closer and fired again, watched the body jerk beneath the bullet. He wanted to empty the gun's every bullet into Ted but the images in the mosaics stirred to life as he walked. A radiant swan swooped down upon a fleeing woman. Titans cleaved the air with giant swords. Hounds tore after Actaeon, while

Apollo stripped Marsyas' skin from agonised muscles. Oedipus's blinded eyes wept tears of blood. The Minotaur strode towards a cowering girl, her body the sacrifice his solitude demanded.

The rain and the pool began to oscillate. The images in the mosaics speeded up until they were only a blur of colour that shifted and swirled like storm patterns, Ted's body their glowing centre. The detritus on the pool floor rose and whipped around him in a funnel of wind.

Marc turned and hobbled as fast as he could to the ladder at the poolside. The floor pitched and billowed with secret life. Violent tremors threatened to throw him from his feet. Something caught at his ankle. It wanted to pull him down, down into a world where the truth of the visions would never be tested. Marc dropped the gun and, straining against the wind that tugged him back towards the centre, closed his hand around the metal rung and yanked himself clear of the tiles whose colours raced towards the dying light of the body at the pool's centre, losing themselves there until nothing remained but darkness.

Suspended inches above the pool, Marc clung to the ladder with the last of his energy, uncertain whether he could trust the existence of a world beneath him. He didn't let go until thick beams of light sliced the inky blackness. They played wildly over the statues, then swept down the slope, over the pool floor and Ted's fallen body to where Marc eased himself back to earth. The lights came closer, converging on him from different angles. Voices called, first in Romanian, then in English.

—Mr Khan? Mr Khan? What are you doing? Are you okay?

—Luca? Marc said, never happier to hear his name.

—There was a shooting. You bleed.

—I fell, Marc said. I'll survive.

—But the shooting.

—It was me. I saw—

Decebal's voice cut in. He snapped something at Luca. Luca turned back to Marc.

—He wants to know what happened. Where are Inspectors Bacovia and Miklos?

—They're dead. I'm the only one who survived.

—Dead? Luca repeated.

—Dead, Marc said. And with that he turned his head away from the persistent torchlight and looked into the dark prism of the emptied pool. Ted's monstrous body lay there, a mound of unmoving flesh. Tickling fingers of torchlight failed to stir it to life as they slowly traced the freshly opened wounds, the mottled camouflage of the flesh, the childhood scars whose histories were already lost.

### **32: The illuminated text**

MARC SLEPT FOR ten hours, undisturbed by ghosts, monsters or daylight. In his dreams, he passed like an insect beneath the doors of each of the writers' chalets and crossed to their desks. He leafed through notebooks, scanned hard drives and examined scribbled notes whose edges charred as he read them, the words flying off the page like tiny insects of flame. When he woke he remembered nothing but the act of reading. The content of the imagined stories was unknowable, the texts mixed into a hybrid of infinite possibility somewhere in his subconscious.

He looked around the room and absorbed the familiar details: the dusty sofa, the dead laptop and his manuscript stack on the desk offered to transport him to a different moment, before Clarissa had lunged across the sofa at him and the waters of the pool had revealed their hoard of secret images. The room was life in its weary relentlessness, always pushing on. Things outlived us. They left us behind.

The British consul arrived while Marc was eating breakfast. A tall man in his early forties, he wore the diplomat's dark suit and tie despite the heat. His handshake transmitted assurance; his amused smile as he surveyed the canteen's moth-eaten hunting trophies exuded nothing but enviable calm.

He accompanied Marc to the administration block and made it clear to Luca and Decebal that he would be translating the questions. But after the discovery of Ted's unidentifiable mutant corpse, Decebal expressed neither surprise nor disbelief at Marc's story. Though he occasionally interrupted to request more detail, his chief concern appeared to be extracting a promise of silence from Marc. The whole area survived on tourism. Marc's was a story they needed to suppress.

As soon as he agreed, the interview ended.

Decebal returned Marc's passport from the pile on his desk, then rested his head on his hands and stared at his scribbled notes as if waiting for them to make sense. Marc flicked the passport open to check it was his. The photo, taken only months ago, seemed a stranger's. The face an innocent's, still unsure of itself as it stared into the camera. He carefully buttoned it into the top pocket of his shirt and left the stuffy, airless office.

Outside in the midday sun, the retreat bristled with police activity. Sniffer dogs tugged search parties towards the forest, while the ghostly figures of forensic scientists collected soil samples and traced out possible routes.

—Thank God that's over, Marc said.

—You do realise you might need to wait another couple of days before you can go home? the consul said.

—What? Is the debate still happening?

—No, no, of course not. I mean you might have to wait at the embassy in Bucharest. It's just a formality, in case they need to ask you anything else.

—O.

—Don't look so downhearted, he said, smiling. You might have to give a couple of press interviews, but we'll get a proper doctor to examine that knee while you're there. And there's plenty of pen and paper too. That's all you writers need, isn't it?

Marc grinned.

—When can I go?

—How long will it take you to pack?

—An hour, maybe two.

—Well, take as long as you need. There's no rush. I'm afraid I'm going to

have to go into Constanța first and make a start on sorting out the mess there. It's absolute chaos with that bloody fire at the hospital. They think Patrick Rayner died in it but nobody can tell me why he was there in the first place. And they're transferring Clarissa Spencer-Hawley as we speak, for the second time in twenty-four hours. As if that's going to aid recovery.

—Recovery?

Clarissa was dead. He'd seen the flatlined monitors and the hellish flames.

—O yes, though who knows how long it'll take her to get back on her feet.

The poor woman's distraught. I spoke to her on the phone this morning and she sounded half-delirious. She said she never wanted to see this place again, screamed at me when I mentioned that she might come back to collect her things.

Marc wanted to ask if she'd said anything about him, but the words wouldn't come. Something told him her words were a coded message via the consul. He was part of the retreat that she was desperate to forget. She wanted to be alone; her final gift to absolve him of guilt. Perhaps the waters had been trying to show him that all along.

—Still, the consul continued, at least I'm not American. At least Rayner and Carroll are dead. Nowakow's just missing.

—Isn't that better?

—Only if you think he'll be found.

—You think he's dead?

—I'll fill you in on it more later, but it's hard to see it being any different.

Who knows how many people that thing killed? But the important thing is that you're safe. I'll send the car back for you when you're ready. You might have to go back to Bucharest alone for now, but perhaps we can have lunch together first.

—There's no need, if you're busy—



—Please, it would be my pleasure. It's not every day we get a writer out here, the consul said, then paused before he added, Besides, I feel like I owe you.

—What for?

—I was the one who put your name forward for this bloody thing in the first place. I hope you won't hold it against me.

—Of course not.

—I'd just got sick of the whole Romanian jamboree around Nowakow when he's been writing the same book for the last twenty years. I thought they could do with someone who's trying to do something different. I had no idea it would ever turn into such a nightmare.

—It's fine, don't worry.

—That's very kind of you to say so, but I'm sure it's worth at least a lunch. After all, we might as well make use of the expense account while we've still got it. And I'd genuinely love to hear what you've been working on. If you don't mind, that is.

—No, Marc said, feeling his face breaking into an unexpected smile. It'd be a pleasure.

Later, Marc stood at the side of the drained pool and smoked his final cigarette at the retreat. Below him, the sunlight reflecting off the puddles of rainwater marbled the tiled walls with an illuminated text of shifting veins of shadow and gold.

Nothing else moved. To an unpractised eye the pool floor would have looked the same as always. But Marc saw something he'd glimpsed the night before when the police torches had played over the pool. The mosaic had a new figure, its lines perfectly executed: half-hidden by scattered leaves, a creature half-man and half-rhinoceros held its jaws open in a snarl of rage; its horn glowed like a blade of

lightning; its body trailed light as it sped through the forest.

He flicked his cigarette into the empty pool and struggled up the slope for the final time. A car was waiting for him, the chauffeur already loading his luggage into the boot. Marc shook hands with Luca, and waved an unacknowledged farewell to Decebal, who lingered in the office doorway with his face downcast as a mourner's outside a crematorium.

Marc climbed into the back seat of the car. He shifted uncomfortably as something dug into his thigh. It was the pen and small notebook he'd put into his pocket as he packed. He took them out and, feeling like a parody of a celebrity, leant forward and told the chauffeur to drive on.

Luca and Decebal watched him through the rear windscreen. As the car pulled away, Marc turned in profile to take one last look at State Hunting Lodge #1. By the time it had moved past the herm at the exit, he was looking down at the seat, his brow furrowed in concentration on the notebook in his lap and the words he was writing.

The midday sun bounced off the car roof onto the trees, setting the leaves aflame with reflected light.

**THE LANGUAGE OF FREEDOM: NARRATIVE FORM  
IN E. L. DOCTOROW**

## List of Abbreviations of Works by E. L. Doctorow

- BB* *Billy Bathgate* (New York: Random House, 1989; repr. New York: Plume, 1998)
- BL* *Big as Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1966)
- C* *Creationists: Selected Essays 1993–2006* (New York: Random House, 2006)
- CG* *City of God* (New York: Random House, 2000; repr. London: Abacus, 2001)
- ELDP* The E. L. Doctorow Papers 1931–2002, Series II: Manuscripts; Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries
- HL* *Homer and Langley* (London: Little, Brown, 2009)
- JLHC* *Jack London, Hemingway and the Constitution: Selected Essays, 1977–92* (New York: Random House, 1993)
- LL* *Loon Lake* (New York: Random House, 1980; repr. London: Picador, 1985)
- LP* *Lives of the Poets* (New York: Random House, 1984; repr. London: Picador, 1986)
- RU* *Reporting the Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003)
- TBD* *The Book of Daniel* (New York: Random House, 1971; repr. London: Picador, 1982)
- W* *The Waterworks* (New York: Random House, 1994; repr. New York: Random House, 2007)
- WF* *World's Fair* (New York: Random House, 1985; repr. New York: Plume, 1996)
- WHT* *Welcome to Hard Times* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1960; repr. New York: Plume, 1996)

## Introduction: Towards a Language of Freedom

In what has become his most critically discussed essay, 1977's 'False Documents', E. L. Doctorow states that 'there is a regime language that derives its power from what we are supposed to be and a language of freedom whose power consists in what we threaten to become'.<sup>1</sup> This quotation forms part of a complex argument that celebrates the power of fiction – with its extra 'degree of perception or acuity or heightened awareness' – to offer an alternative to the regime's self-interested reduction of language to 'a property of facts themselves' (p. 152) that helps governments to perpetuate the version of history and events that will sustain them in power. Novelists are seen as necessary subversives who 'know explicitly that the world in which we live is still to be formed and that reality is amenable to any construction that is placed upon it' (p. 164).

Critics have, understandably, taken 'False Documents' as a manifesto both for Doctorow's art and for American postmodernism in general.<sup>2</sup> However, most attention has been paid to Doctorow's claim at the opening of the essay's final section that 'there is no fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: There is only narrative'.<sup>3</sup> For Levine, this quotation provides a neat summation of the postmodern view that 'the boundary between fact and fiction' is 'itself fictional', while for Harris it provides a rationale for Doctorow's production

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<sup>1</sup> 'False Documents', in *JLHC*, pp. 149–64 (p. 152).

<sup>2</sup> One exception to this is Christopher D. Morris, who argues on p. 91 of *Models of Misrepresentation: On the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991) that we should see the 'I' of the essays and interviews as creating 'a parallel illusory Doctorow'. This is an interesting angle on the essay, but I suspect Morris' main motivation for such a view stems from his desire to categorise all of Doctorow's work as engaged in postmodern *prosopopoeia*, and risks ignoring its significance as a piece of theory.

<sup>3</sup> *JLHC*, p. 163.

of ‘fictionalised “counter-memories” that challenge ideas of American identity’ through the reworking of history.<sup>4</sup> Whilst there is clearly no doubt that Doctorow’s work does refashion history in a manner that embodies a Lyotardian scepticism towards the grand narrative, it is my aim in this study to refocus the critical debate around Doctorow away from his treatment of history and back towards the idea, embodied in ‘False Documents’, of the novelist as a subversive agent whose fiction, written in the imagination’s ‘language of freedom’, undermines the regime’s factual version of the world.

This refocusing of emphasis will, I hope, show Doctorow’s politics to be more complex than the critical debate about his treatment of historical doxa has allowed. For there seems to be something about the study of Doctorow’s refashioning of history that forces critics into politically extreme characterisations of his writing, whether it be a Leftist reading such as Fredric Jameson’s celebration of Doctorow as ‘the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past’, or a more right-wing reaction such as Hilton Kramer’s labelling of Doctorow as ‘the true laureate’ of the ‘myth of the “bad” America’.<sup>5</sup> Both these readings, and others like them, threaten to relegate Doctorow to the extremist margins of politics, inviting a visceral response from the reader dependent on their political bias that is actually resisted by the works themselves.

For example, any celebration of the Left we might perceive in the works is tempered by endings that frequently grant characters such as Tateh in *Ragtime* and Joe in *Loon Lake* success as arch-capitalists, not to mention *The Book of Daniel*’s

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Levine, *E. L. Doctorow* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 22; Stephen Harris, *The Fiction of Gore Vidal and E. L. Doctorow: Writing the Historical Self* (Oxford: Lang, 2002), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The cultural logic of late capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 24; Hilton Kramer, ‘Political Romance’, in Ben Siegel, ed. *Critical Essays on E.L. Doctorow* (New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 2000) pp. 74–78 (p. 74) (first publ. in *Commentary*, Oct. 1975). This essay collection is hereafter referred to as ‘Siegel’.

savage critique of the self-interest of both the Old and the New Left. Likewise, while critics like Kramer are correct to identify criticism of the American status quo in Doctorow, they ignore the strain in Doctorow's writing that maintains hope that America might yet prove the equal of its democratic ideals and repay the hope that generations have invested in it as a place for a better future. This strain is apparent from Doctorow's first novel onwards, which ends with Blue's refusal to set fire to the ruins of Hard Times because he hopes 'someone will come by sometime who will want to use the wood'.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the critical focus on Doctorow's treatment of history has become so prevalent that it threatens to ghettoise Doctorow into a one-dimensional novelist who, to quote Michiko Kakutani's arch review of *Homer and Langley*, employs a 'patented blend of fact and fiction', and this may, in part, explain the decline in critical interest in him as a writer.<sup>7</sup> After a brief flurry of monographs in the early 1990s, there was a decade-long gap before the publication of anything approaching a further book-length study, but Harris' 2002 comparative study with the works of Gore Vidal was still concerned with the nature of the historical novel.

Despite Doctorow's continued publication, it seems as though many critics have decided that there is nothing more to say, reducing Doctorow to a victim of his own historical revisionary success. Where he once featured predominantly in discussions of postmodernism such as Jameson's or Linda Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism*, he is now more likely to be replaced in analyses of postmodernism by, for example, Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo or Philip Roth, writers whose work critics feel can be viewed from more than just the angle of the historical.

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<sup>6</sup> *WHT*, p. 212.

<sup>7</sup> Michiko Kakutani, 'How did they end up that way?', *The New York Times*, 1 September 2009 <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/01/books/01kakutani.html>> [accessed September 27 2009] (para. 3 of 15).

However, there have been some attempts by critics to shift the debate away from the focus on the reinterpretation of history. Undoubtedly the first monograph to do so is Morris' *Models of Misrepresentation: On the Fiction of E.L. Doctorow*. Despite occasional moments where the reading of Doctorow feels forced, Morris makes a convincing case that one of Doctorow's prime concerns is the question of the (im)possibility of representation in the face of death. By identifying the role of the artist/writer or his surrogate in Doctorow's fiction, he suggests that all of Doctorow's fictions problematise not history, but the act of narrative and of reading itself. In this foregrounding of narrative and its significance, Morris draws on Geoffrey Galt Harpham's influential essay 'E.L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative', which inquires into how narrative becomes political, though its argument is somewhat weakened by an overenthusiastic tracing of *The Book of Daniel*'s metaphor of electricity into *Ragtime* and *Loon Lake*.<sup>8</sup>

Other critics to have focussed on Doctorow's narrative strategies include Barbara Foley on *Ragtime*, and both T. V. Reed and Andrew Pepper on *Daniel*, some of whom will be revisited in later chapters.<sup>9</sup> However, several essays have highlighted other thematic concerns than the historical. These range from Forrey's unconvincing Freudian reading of *The Book of Daniel* as a tracing of incestuous desire,<sup>10</sup> to Culp's attempts to briefly tear Doctorow free of Marxist criticism and

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<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, 'E. L. Doctorow and the Technology of Narrative', *PMLA* 100 (1985), 81–95.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Foley, 'From *U.S.A.* to *Ragtime*: Notes on the Forms of Historical Consciousness in Modern Fiction', *American Literature* 50 (1978), 85–105; T.V. Reed, 'Genealogy/Narrative/Power: Questions of Postmodernity in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*', *American Literary History* 4:2 (1992), 288–304; Andrew Pepper, 'State Power Matters: Power, the State and Political Struggle in the Post-War American Novel', *Textual Practice* 19 (2005), 467–91.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Forrey, 'Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*: All in the Family', *Studies in American Jewish Literature*, 2 (1982), 167–73.



examine his work from a feminist perspective instead.<sup>11</sup> Further insights into Doctorow's practice include Ditsky's brief inspection of *Ragtime*'s intertextual relation with Kleist's *Michael Kohlhaas*, and Diemert's analysis of *The Waterworks* as Gnostic detective fiction.<sup>12</sup>

The two most recently published monographs on Doctorow also steer debate away from the historical. Michelle M. Tokarczyk investigates what she categorises as Doctorow's 'midfiction version of postmodernism', a form of writing that 'oscillates between indeterminacy and commitment'.<sup>13</sup> Although Tokarczyk's study provides some useful insights, particularly into Doctorow's use of genre, it is difficult to avoid the final impression that many of her readings are overly optimistic and refuse to engage with the full import of Doctorow's arguments. Nevertheless, there is far more to recommend Tokarczyk's readings than those offered by Catherine Walker Bergström. Bergström's book aims to 'offer a less cynical interpretation of this writer' through a reading of Doctorow in the light of postmodern ethics.<sup>14</sup> However, this leads to some questionable readings, such as the claim that, at the end of *Billy Bathgate*, Billy 'is presumably providing [his illegitimate son] with a much more ethical role model than Dutch Schultz has been', and none more so than her final suggestion that Doctorow's 'use of postmodernist writing techniques is not to be taken too seriously'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Mildred Culp, 'Women and Tragic Destiny in Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel*', *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 2 (1982), 155–66.

<sup>12</sup> John Ditsky, 'The German Source of *Ragtime*: A Note', in Richard Trenner, ed., *E. L. Doctorow, essays and conversations* (New York: Ontario Review Press, 1983), pp. 179–81 (first publ. in *The Ontario Review* 4 (1976), 84–86); Brian Diemert, 'The *Waterworks*: E. L. Doctorow's Gnostic Detective Story', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 45 (2003), 352–73.

<sup>13</sup> Michelle M. Tokarczyk, *E. L. Doctorow's Skeptical Commitment* (New York: Lang, 2000), p. 69 & p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Catherine Walker Bergström, *Intuition of an Infinite Obligation: Narrative Ethics and Postmodern Gnostics in the Fiction of E. L. Doctorow* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Bergström, p. 113 and p. 141.

What all of these works, both monographs and essays, have in common is a tendency to discuss each of the works in isolation, rarely drawing links between them. This no doubt stems from a misplaced willingness to accept unquestioningly the critical shibboleth that ‘no two books by Doctorow resemble each other in any overt way’,<sup>16</sup> which effectively militates against discussion of Doctorow’s works in any kind of thematic groupings.

One critic who breaks this mould is Michael Wutz, who, in tracing the recurrent trope of garbage in Doctorow’s work in order to ‘foreground the location of Doctorow’s narrative as a technological medium within an ecology of other contemporary media against which [...] it has to redefine itself’, draws frequent parallels between the works and eschews the need to discuss them chronologically.<sup>17</sup> Wutz’s essay, which eventually concludes that Doctorow’s use of garbage is linked to a wider engagement with the discarded in which the refuse of society creates Deleuzian rhizomes that unsettle the narrative of power, provides an example both of how a political reading of Doctorow can be achieved without a basis in his reworking of history, and of a tracing of a recurrent trope that problematises the notion of the works being so different that they must be discussed in isolation.

It is my aim in this study to follow Wutz’s example of trying to discuss certain of Doctorow’s works thematically, and I will do so by focussing primarily on what makes his fiction political. By political here, I do not mean to suggest that I will show how Doctorow is a writer who follows a particular political doctrine, because as already mentioned, there are significant problems with trying to

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<sup>16</sup> Carol C. Harter and James R. Thompson, *E. L. Doctorow* (Boston: Twayne Press, 1990), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Michael Wutz, ‘Literary Narrative and Information Culture: Garbage, Waste, and Residue in the Work of E. L. Doctorow’, *Contemporary Literature* 54 (2003), 501–35 (p. 505).

categorise him as such. Although Doctorow clearly has sympathies with the socially responsible policies of the Left, and, as we shall see in chapter two, has been a vocal critic of the Reagan and George Bush Sr administrations, he has consistently distanced himself from any particular political movement in interviews, claiming that, with the exception of the philosophically utopian idea of anarchism, ‘everything else has been totally discredited: capitalism, communism, socialism. None of it seems to work’.<sup>18</sup> What I would argue instead is that Doctorow’s political novels are better understood as embodying the struggle to achieve the subversive language of freedom he identifies in ‘False Documents’. As Doctorow has said in interview, Americans are ‘living a national ideology that’s invisible to us because we’re inside it’, and his work can be viewed as engaged in the struggle to make that ideology visible without either being silenced or compromising one’s voice.<sup>19</sup>

That Doctorow sees the writer’s task as to offer an alternative to this dominant ideology is clear not only in ‘False Documents’ and other essays, but also in his fiction. This is particularly the case in ‘The Writer in the Family’, the opening story of *Lives of the Poets*. In the story, the ten-year-old narrator Jonathan, whose biographical details suggest he is a cipher for Doctorow himself, is forced by his aunts to compose letters from his recently deceased father as if he were still alive. In this, the aunts become the story’s surrogate regime, ignoring their brother’s death in support of the furtherance of their ‘ideology’, the belief that all things should be subsumed to the wellbeing of their mother, even their brother’s death. At first Jonathan complies, but his realisation that he is ‘being implicated’

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<sup>18</sup> Victor Navasky, ‘E. L. Doctorow: I Saw A Sign’, in Christopher D. Morris, ed., *Conversations with E. L. Doctorow* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1999), pp. 59–63 (p. 60) (first publ. in *New York Times Book Review*, 28 September 1980, 44–45). Morris’ collection of interviews is hereafter referred to as *Conversations*.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Moyers, ‘E. L. Doctorow, Novelist’, in *Conversations*, pp. 147–64 (p. 150) (first broadcast in *Bill Moyers: A World of Ideas* by Bill Moyers (1990)).

proves the cue for him to seize independence as a writer and create a fiction that is true to his vision of his father, and not the image his aunts wish to propagate.<sup>20</sup>

This story provides a microcosm of Doctorow's career and its consistent friction with the 'regime', or what Raymond Williams terms 'the effective dominant culture'.<sup>21</sup> This dominant, as Williams argues, operates via a '*selective tradition* [...] in which from a whole possible area of past and present, certain meanings and practices are chosen for emphasis', while others 'are neglected and excluded' and some 'reinterpreted, diluted, or put into forms which support or at least do not contradict other elements within the effective dominant culture'.<sup>22</sup>

The dominant culture or regime against which Doctorow has been writing for most of his career is that of 'the cultural milieu of the late, long, cold war', when the dominant culture of anti-Soviet paranoia created an 'ideology of fear [that] generated as discrete a social and cultural pathology as any of our wars'.<sup>23</sup> However, such a milieu is only possible if people accept the regime's version of events unquestioningly, and my first chapter will examine how Doctorow works against this uncritical acceptance by using encyclopaedic models of narrative. By examining first how the term 'encyclopaedic' might be usefully construed, then asking which of Doctorow's works might be considered encyclopaedic, and finally noting how Doctorow uses encyclopaedic models to question relations of power, identity and language, this chapter argues that what may initially appear to be Doctorow's most fractured and inscrutable texts share a common preoccupation with knowledge and its dissemination, and unsettle the dominant culture by highlighting the political nature of any act of interpretation.

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<sup>20</sup> *LP*, p. 13.

<sup>21</sup> Raymond Williams, 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', in *Culture and Materialism: Selected Essays* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 31–49 (p. 45).

<sup>22</sup> Williams, p. 39.

<sup>23</sup> *JLHC*, pp. *x–xii*.

Although the first chapter will span most of Doctorow's career, the second will focus on the period from 1984–94. Doctorow published five works in these years, a time in which, with the ascendancy of Reaganomics and the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, the dominant mutated into a form that 'conflated' the ruling 'ideology with the capitalist principles of the nineteenth century'.<sup>24</sup> However, there has been very little critical attention paid to the novels of this period in comparison with *Ragtime* and *The Book of Daniel*, and a widespread failure to engage with their political aspects, a critical oversight that I will attempt to redress by examining how *Billy Bathgate* and *The Waterworks*, two genre fictions from this period, can be read as what John Whalen-Bridge terms 'submerged political novels'.<sup>25</sup>

In both these chapters, I will draw on several theorists including Bakhtin, Cawelti, Moretti, Barthes, and Frye in my reading of Doctorow's work. I will also make significant use of materials from the recently established Doctorow archive, materials which have been unavailable to previous scholars and which suggest alternative ways of reading of the novels.

Perhaps though, the most significant departure in these chapters will be my attempt to read Doctorow in the light of Herman Melville, specifically in terms of *Moby-Dick* and 'Bartleby, the Scrivener'. That Melville has been an influence on Doctorow throughout his career is suggested from as early as the workings of his unpublished first novel, where the narrator is named Scrivener and he discusses with his colleague Melville's capacity for 'staging a moral crisis under the sky'.<sup>26</sup> Doctorow claims to have been largely unconscious of this Melvillean influence until, when rereading *Moby-Dick* in 2000, he discovered:

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. *xii*.

<sup>25</sup> John Whalen-Bridge, *Political Fiction and the American Self* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998), p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> ELDP, 2A, 23.002, Misc Work-in-Progress draft of *Welcome to Hard Times*, loose typewritten sheet.

how familiar the voice of that book is, [...] the technical effrontery, [...] the character and rhythm of the sentences [...] I've realized how much of my own work [...] responds to his perverse romanticism, endorses his double-dipping into the accounts of realism and allegory [...] [W]hatever rule breaking I have done in my work I probably owe to Melville.<sup>27</sup>

If, as Jeremy Green comments, there is a danger in the postmodern era that 'canonical works survive outside the classrooms as pendants to the heritage industry', then, whether conscious or not, Doctorow's use and echoes of Melville help further destabilise the dominant culture by evoking an oppositional residual of American democratic idealism and placing it back in the cultural mainstream.<sup>28</sup> In doing so, Doctorow's novels suggest that the idea of disrupting the dominant is not temporally bound to the Cold-War era, but forms part of a tradition of a language of freedom encapsulated in the American novel.

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<sup>27</sup> 'Composing *Moby-Dick*: What Might Have Happened', in *C*, pp. 33–50 (pp. 35–36).

<sup>28</sup> Jeremy Green, *Late Postmodernism: American Fiction at the Millennium* (New York: Palgrave, 2005), p. 45.

## 1: Encyclopaedias of Resistance

### I

In his essay on Doctorow's narrative techniques, Michael Wutz suggests that Doctorow's 'especially encyclopedic novels' bear similarities to the Bible in their bricolage construction from snippets and excerpts.<sup>1</sup> This characterisation of Doctorow's novels as encyclopaedic is repeated elsewhere when Wutz describes the novels as '[f]requently polyphonic and encyclopedic, [...] transcend[ing] boundaries, subsum[ing] local knowledge, and offer[ing] perspective amid competing accounts of reality'.<sup>2</sup> While I believe Wutz is correct to identify some of Doctorow's work as encyclopaedic in range and style, his essay raises questions about the significance of this stylistic mode in Doctorow only to leave them unanswered. This chapter will therefore attempt to build on Wutz's work by considering the significance of the encyclopaedic mode in Doctorow's fiction. Firstly, I will explore what the term *encyclopaedic* means when used in reference to novels. Secondly, I will examine whether all of Doctorow's novels are, as Wutz appears to suggest, encyclopaedic, or whether this is a term best limited to ones which are 'especially encyclopedic'. And finally, I will examine both *The Book of Daniel* and *City of God* to illustrate how Doctorow's use of the encyclopaedic mode relates to the subversive role of the novelist he identifies in 'False Documents' and elsewhere.

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<sup>1</sup> Wutz, p. 513. Like other critics writing in American English, Wutz favours the spelling 'encyclopedic', but in the body of my essay I use the British spelling 'encyclopaedic'.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 528.

Although Wutz uses the term encyclopaedic without any further scrutiny, its meaning as a critical term is actually quite elusive. The first critic to offer a sustained discussion of the encyclopaedic mode in literature is Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*. In the glossary, Frye defines ‘encyclopaedic form’ as:

A genre presenting an anagogic form of symbolism, such as a sacred scripture, or its analogues in other modes. The term includes the Bible, Dante’s *Commedia*, the great epics, and the works of Joyce and Proust.<sup>3</sup>

The reference to anagogy, the idea of literature as a total order of words, suggests from the outset that the encyclopaedic form is one whose system of references are frequently literary and where the world is viewed as some kind of text, with the attendant caveats that it is therefore open both to endless interpretation and recreation.<sup>4</sup> While this concept of anagogy is key to an understanding of encyclopaedic texts, closer scrutiny of Frye’s work reveals other important criteria by which we can both identify and interpret the encyclopaedic text.

Initially, Frye uses *encyclopaedic* as little more than an adjective to describe compendia of myths and folktales, such as the Bible and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, but when, in his discussion of the mythical epic, he begins to interrogate the term more closely, we see that one of the hallmarks of encyclopaedism is a relation to prophecy and the oracular:

In the mythical mode the encyclopaedic form is the sacred scripture, and in the other modes we should expect to find encyclopaedic forms which constitute a series of increasingly human *analogies* of mythical or scriptural

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<sup>3</sup> Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957; repr. London: Penguin, 1990), p. 365.

<sup>4</sup> An example of this viewing of the world in textual terms would be Ishmael’s classification of whales into folios, quartos and duodecimos in Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick, or, The Whale* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1851, repr. London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 148–57.



revelation.

The other principle is that while there may be a great variety of episodic forms in any mode, in each mode we may attach a special significance to the episodic form that seems to be the germ out of which the encyclopaedic forms develop. In the mythical mode this central or typical episodic product is the oracle. The oracle develops a number of subsidiary forms, notably the commandment, the parable, the aphorism, and the prophecy.<sup>5</sup>

Frye goes on to argue that as literature developed and became less concerned with the divine, memory grew increasingly important for what he calls 'the encyclopaedic tendency'. In the modern era, he identifies works as diverse as *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *The Cantos* as encyclopaedic, and says that their 'main theme' is the comparison of the 'pure but transient vision' (for example, the Joycean epiphany) with 'the vast panorama unrolled by history', 'a sense of contrast between the course of a whole civilization and the tiny flashes of significant moments which reveal its meaning'.<sup>6</sup>

Thus we see that the prophetic strand Frye identifies in the encyclopaedic mode's early scriptural incarnation moves from the oracular task of divining the future to the prophet's other task of interpreting the world and history. With this evolution the prophet's original task to interpret the world and history as the manifestation of God's *logos* shifts in the modern encyclopaedic mode to one that limits itself to interpreting the world as it is, without necessarily presupposing a higher meaning relating to the divine. Indeed, in Frye's references to works such as *A la recherche du temps perdu* and *The Waste Land*, he appears to suggest that the prophet, the servant of the divine, has now been replaced by the character with an artistic consciousness or imagination, such as Marcel or Tiresias. That is to say, the artist is now responsible for interpreting the world.

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<sup>5</sup> Frye, p. 56.

<sup>6</sup> Frye, p. 61.

Frye's other major contribution to the understanding of what constitutes the encyclopaedic mode is his identification of its fractured and disjointed form. This idea of discontinuous form first appears in an aside about Pound and Eliot in which Frye notes the 'paradoxical technique of [...] poetry which is encyclopaedic and yet discontinuous'.<sup>7</sup> However, it is explored at greater length when, in his consideration of the differences between novel, romance, confession and anatomy (Frye's term for Menippean satire) as form, Frye attempts to produce 'a simple and logical explanation for the form of [...] *Moby-Dick* or *Tristram Shandy*.'<sup>8</sup>

Using *Ulysses* as an example, Frye illustrates how writers who have combined the four separate forms within one book have produced a subgenre of literature that critics have consistently struggled to identify, largely because it simultaneously fits all forms and none. This is what Frye identifies as the encyclopaedic form, marked out from other hybrid genres by its incorporation of the anatomy, a form which involves 'creative treatment of exhaustive erudition' and which, in *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, for example, reveals an 'encyclopaedic approach to [...] construction'.<sup>9</sup> This examination of the form also points us back to the glossary's reference to anagogy: the encyclopaedic form is a form that, in subsuming all others, makes itself a total system of words.

This idea of anagogy and of multiple genres contained in one is echoed in the next major attempt to classify what the encyclopaedic mode might be, when Edward Mendelson identifies encyclopaedic narratives as 'encyclopedia[s] of narrative' and literary styles, 'polyglot books that provide a history of language'.<sup>10</sup> An early attempt to place Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* in a critical context,

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<sup>7</sup> Frye, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup> Frye, p. 313.

<sup>9</sup> Frye, p. 311.

<sup>10</sup> Edward Mendelson, 'Encyclopedic Narrative: From Dante to Pynchon', *MLN* 91, *Comparative Literature* (1976), 1267–75 (p. 1270 and p. 1273).

Mendelson's essay has been extremely influential on later discussions of encyclopaedism. For Mendelson, encyclopaedic narratives are an exceptional genre distinguished by several key features. They are works that 'occupy a special historical position in their cultures, a fulcrum, often, between periods that later readers consider national pre-history and national history'. Created by 'authors [who] set out to imitate epics', but write about a time '*near* the immediate present, although not in it', the texts acquire the appearance of prophecy. They 'attempt to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture, while identifying the ideological perspectives from which that culture shapes and interprets its knowledge', usually through the synecdoche of a science, such as the cetology in *Moby-Dick*. They contain at least one character who attempts 'to live according to the conventions of another genre', and include accounts of an extra-narrative art, such as film and opera in *Gravity's Rainbow*. In addition, they 'attend to the complexities of statecraft', incorporate images of giants, and identify a national culture.<sup>11</sup>

While this exhaustive litany of features of the encyclopaedic narrative provides an interesting critical framework for reconsidering certain narratives, it is perhaps unsurprising that Mendelson claims that he knows of only seven that satisfy these criteria: the *Commedia*, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, *Don Quixote*, *Faust*, *Moby-Dick*, *Ulysses* and *Gravity's Rainbow*. It is also, perhaps, equally unsurprising that Mendelson himself encounters the limitations of these categories within the essay and appears to struggle to justify the inclusion of even the seven listed works in the exclusive canon he envisions.

Although there is not adequate space in which to detail all of the moments where the chosen works fail to fulfil Mendelson's strictures, some examples of

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<sup>11</sup> Mendelson, pp. 1267–70.

where his essay becomes tendentious include the claim that Melville's detailing of the whale's 'etymological ancestry' in the epigraphs are enough to make *Moby-Dick* a polyglot work, or the way that most of the things which identify *Ulysses* as encyclopaedic are, in fact, limited to the 'Oxen of the Sun' chapter.

Perhaps Mendelson's most troublesome claim is, however, that encyclopaedic narratives are limited to only one author/work per nation. Seeing that both Melville and Pynchon are American, he tries to sidestep this stricture by hailing Pynchon's novel as the encyclopaedic work of 'the first common international culture since medieval Latin Europe separated into the national cultures of the Renaissance'.<sup>12</sup> This weak clinging to the tenets of national exclusivity is further troubled by references elsewhere to the problematic 'recurrence of encyclopedic authors who are not "national authors"', such as Balzac and Dos Passos, and to 'mock-encyclopedias' such as *Tristram Shandy* and 'near-encyclopedias' like *War and Peace* and *Dead Souls*, works which seem to be excluded from the encyclopaedic canon simply because Mendelson adjudges them to have failed 'to occupy a crucial and originating role in their cultures'.<sup>13</sup>

None of these limitations of Mendelson's argument are, of course, reason alone to dismiss either his championing of the sustained study of encyclopaedic narratives or the many useful points he adds to Frye's original observations.<sup>14</sup> However, they are a warning that any overly strict taxonomy can stifle debate rather than encourage it, and a reminder of Frye's assertion that 'generic distinctions are among the ways in which literary works are *ideally* presented, whatever the actualities are'.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Mendelson, p. 1272.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 1268.

<sup>14</sup> This despite the fact that Mendelson relegates Frye to a dismissive footnote, effectively claiming all the insights into encyclopaedic narrative as his own.

<sup>15</sup> Frye, p. 247.

Certainly, while subsequent critics have acknowledged Mendelson's influence on their thinking, none have limited themselves either to the seven works he identified or too strict an adherence to his original taxonomy. Thus, although Franco Moretti's *Modern Epic* acknowledges Mendelson's influence and also insists on the uniqueness of what he terms 'monuments' and 'sacred texts',<sup>16</sup> he excludes Pynchon from his discussion in favour of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Similarly, Richard Hardack is far less prescriptive than Mendelson in his discussion of what he categorises as 'the genre of the inherently male encyclopedic travel narrative', with his focus on both *Tristram Shandy* and *Gulliver's Travels* effectively dismissing the criterion that encyclopaedic narratives be limited to one per nation.<sup>17</sup>

The most sustained discussion of encyclopaedic narratives post-Mendelson is Hilary A. Clark's book *The Fictional Encyclopedia*, in which she draws on both Frye and Mendelson's arguments in order to investigate a form she views as 'unstable by nature, always shifting, taking on the traits of other forms'.<sup>18</sup> Clark's major contribution to the understanding of encyclopaedism is, in my opinion, her investigation of its links to the encyclopaedic project of Diderot and the 'basic impulse [...] to know all there is to know'. This 'totalizing knowledge' in many ways echoes Mendelson's claim that the encyclopaedic narrative attempts 'to render the full range of knowledge and beliefs of a national culture', but Clark shows that it is problematised by the fact that the encyclopaedist knows that 'total comprehensiveness can never be attained', a point which will be explored further

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<sup>16</sup> Franco Moretti, *Modern Epic: The World System from Goethe to García Márquez*, trans. by Quintin Hoare (London: Verso, 1996), p. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Hardack, 'Going belly up: Entries, entrees, and the all-consuming encyclopedic text', *Lit: Literature Interpretation Theory*, 7:2, 131–51 (p. 131).

<sup>18</sup> Hilary A. Clark, *The Fictional Encyclopedia: Joyce, Pound, Sollers* (New York & London: Garland, 1990), p. 13.

when examining Doctorow's texts below.<sup>19</sup>

By taking Frye, Mendelson and Clark together, we can form a taxonomy of the encyclopaedic narrative which, if we do not apply it as rigidly as Mendelson does his, will help us to explore the significance of the encyclopaedic impulse in the modern novel. That is, by employing the taxonomy less as a barrier to an exclusive genre and more as an aid to assess narrative, we may begin to see links between what, at first sight, appears diverse and unconnected. This taxonomy proposes that encyclopaedic texts are characterised by: a status as epics or near-epics (often in the form of an epic journey); elements of prophecy; a sense of history and the work's own significance within it; marked erudition, such as the cetology of *Moby-Dick* or the angelic hierarchies of Dante, which forms part of a quest for a totalising knowledge; and discontinuity in the narrative via a bricolage of voices/forms that include elements of the anatomy and help mark the encyclopaedic form by its 'ostentatious "bookishness"' or anagogy.<sup>20</sup>

How this genre relates to literature as a subversive force that unsettles the dominant regime is suggested by Mikhail Bakhtin, who also employs the term encyclopaedic though he never clarifies what he means by it. In the essays collected in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin raises several points which are similar to both Frye and Mendelson's. For Bakhtin, the epic is an ancient form distinct from the novel, but in his discussion of its emphasis on 'the future memory of the past'<sup>21</sup> we can see both a relation to Mendelson's idea of the encyclopaedic narrative's use of the recent past to create the impression of prophecy, and to Frye's claim that memory has become an increasingly important topic for the

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<sup>19</sup> Clark, p. 20.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981, repr. 2004), p. 19.

modern encyclopaedic narrator.

This idea could be dismissed as something that only relates to the epic, but we should remember that encyclopaedic narratives are frequently ‘near epics’, and therefore exemplify how, as Bakhtin argues, other genres can become novelized. In this process of ‘novelisation’, genres acquire ‘an indeterminacy, a certain semantic open-endedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)’.<sup>22</sup> As Bakhtin illustrates, in Dante, the first of Mendelson’s encyclopaedists, this manifests itself in ‘an acute feeling for the epoch’s contradictions [...] for the end of an epoch’.<sup>23</sup> The novelisation of a genre allows that genre to more accurately interpret the world around it, not just a distant historical past as in the epic.

A further link between the theory of encyclopaedic narrative and Bakhtin’s thought lies in the perception that the novel as a genre stems from the Greek romances and the Menippean satires, or anatomies. Bakhtin notes that ‘the Greek romance strives for a certain *encyclopedic* quality’ (my italics), a quality whose Bakhtinian classification as ‘characteristic of the genre’ echoes Frye’s discussion of the Menippea.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Bakhtin’s argument that, in its legacy from the Menippean satires, the novel subverts ‘external expressions of the dominant force and truth’ and ‘symbols of authority’ by its embrace of ‘the eternally living element of unofficial language and unofficial thought’ recalls Mendelson’s observation that encyclopaedic narratives identify the ideological precepts and strictures of states.<sup>25</sup> And even Mendelson’s focus on other languages is mirrored in Bakhtin’s concern with polyglossia.

Yet perhaps the strongest link is Bakhtin’s idea of polyphony, of the novel

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<sup>22</sup> Bakhtin, p. 7.

<sup>23</sup> Bakhtin, p. 156.

<sup>24</sup> Bakhtin, p. 88.

<sup>25</sup> Bakhtin, p. 20.

as ‘a genre formed of many styles and many images’.<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin returns to this several times, linking it to the parody of power, eventually arguing that comic novels form ‘an encyclopedia of all strata and forms of literary language’.<sup>27</sup> It must, of course, be remembered that Bakhtin here is talking about novels in general, not merely encyclopaedic narratives, but the correlation with the idea of the encyclopaedic narrative as a compendium of different styles and voices is clear.

This leads me to speculate that encyclopaedic narratives, marked as they are by hybridity and discontinuity, are paradoxically the novel in its purest form.<sup>28</sup> That is to say that while Bakhtin may be correct that all novels are polyphonic to varying degrees, encyclopaedic narratives are examples of this taken to its maximum potential. With their ‘peculiar indeterminacy of form’,<sup>29</sup> they mix not only the voices of the different fictional genres and styles, but also permit the inclusion of non-fictional genres, such as the scientific writing in *Moby-Dick* or the journalism and advertising texts in *Ulysses*. Encyclopaedic narratives threaten to take the novel beyond its own boundaries and into areas that, as Frye observed, critics struggle to describe, forcing them to resort to terms like ‘behemoth’ and ‘demogorgon’ instead. But rather than dangerous creatures that critics should fear, encyclopaedic narratives are, in fact, the novel at its most democratic, novels which in their fluidity and openness of form seem to epitomise Bakhtin’s idea of the ‘novel as the genre of becoming’,<sup>30</sup> presenting an interpretative circuit that can only be completed by the reader him/herself and which brings to mind Barthes’ category of the *scriptible*.

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<sup>26</sup> Bakhtin, p. 60.

<sup>27</sup> Bakhtin, p. 301.

<sup>28</sup> Dante is, of course, technically excluded from this assertion through writing in verse. Yet if one considers the liberating impact the *Commedia* had on medieval literature, both in its scope and its embrace of the vulgar tongue, there can be little doubt that he achieved something similar in poetry and the epic.

<sup>29</sup> Mendelson, p. 1270.

<sup>30</sup> Bakhtin, p. 22.



Clearly then, whatever disagreements we may have with the strictness of Mendelson's taxonomy, it cannot be denied that the encyclopaedic must be seen as a largely exclusive genre, admitting far fewer texts than those it excludes.

Assuming this to be the case returns us to Wutz's observation about Doctorow's encyclopaedic novels with which the discussion started, and leads me to examine in the next section whether *encyclopaedic* is a term that can justifiably be used to describe any or all of his novels.

## II

When considering the question of whether or not Doctorow's novels are encyclopaedic, it is helpful to consider Mendelson's argument that 'most encyclopedic works include characters who try unsuccessfully to live according to the conventions of another genre'.<sup>31</sup> This trait manifests itself most famously in the figure of Don Quixote, who literally believes himself to be involved in a knightly romance, but can be seen in less extreme versions in characters such as Stubb in *Moby-Dick*, whose actions and attitudes threaten to reduce the novel to a farce. Interestingly, this trait also provides a possible explanation for why critics like Wutz might consider all of Doctorow's novels encyclopaedic, even though I will argue that that is not the case. For if we examine Doctorow's novels, we can see that most of them contain a character who is either drawn towards, or embodies, the encyclopaedic impulse. By this I do not wish to suggest that there are characters that wish to live by the conventions of, for example, *Don Quixote* or *Gravity's Rainbow*; rather, there are characters who are drawn towards mimicking

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<sup>31</sup> Mendelson, p. 1270.

the original French encyclopaedists in their attempt to systemize and capture knowledge.

Although critics have argued that Doctorow's works tend to have an artist-creator figure at their centre, they seem to have overlooked the way in which this figure is often obsessed by the possibility of compiling knowledge.<sup>32</sup> Blue in *Welcome to Hard Times* appoints himself historian of the town and thereby becomes the first of Doctorow's would-be compilers of knowledge, but the trope is visible elsewhere: Creighton in *Big as Life* struggles to compile an exhaustive history of the giants in the harbour; the little boy in *Ragtime* is both an avid reader of the newspapers and a keen collector of the discarded, as if fearful that any knowledge might escape him; Edgar ends *World's Fair* by creating a time capsule, a symbolic attempt to encapsulate a society's knowledge; the government agents in 'The Leather Man' in *Lives of the Poets* suggest the sinister possibilities of state-control of knowledge, which is then revisited in 'Child, Dead in the Rose Garden' in *Sweet Land Stories*; Billy and Abbadabba share an encyclopaedic grasp of mathematical knowledge in *Billy Bathgate*, while Arnold Garbage and his basement repository of detritus performs a similar function to the little boy's collection of the discarded in *Ragtime*; *The Waterworks* contains several characters attempting to compile knowledge, one of whom, Sartorius, reappears in *The March*.

This recurrent trope of a character avid to collate knowledge reaches its apotheosis in Doctorow's most recent novel, *Homer and Langley*. Langley, the elder of the novel's two brothers, embodies this trope in two ways. Firstly, after the death of their parents and his own traumatic experiences in the First World War, he becomes the latest of Doctorow's characters to assiduously collect the discarded:

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *Models of Misrepresentation*, p. 11 and Levine, p. 84.

When Langley brings something into the house that has caught his fancy—a piano, a toaster, a Chinese bronze horse, a set of encyclopedias—that is just the beginning. Whatever it is, it will be acquired in several versions because until he loses his interest and goes on to something else he'll be looking for its ultimate expression.<sup>33</sup>

Eventually, this obsession virtually imprisons the brothers within their brownstone, forcing them to shape their existence around an encyclopaedic mound of every possible category and subcategory of detritus that functions as a 'dark mirror image of the official culture'.<sup>34</sup>

Secondly, Langley's interest in compiling some kind of encyclopaedia is symbolised by his aim, revisited several times throughout the novel, to create an 'eternally current dateless newspaper, the only newspaper anyone would ever need'.<sup>35</sup> For this project, Langley buys a copy of every edition of the daily papers, then cuts and pastes stories into a newspaper that he hopes will cover any eventuality, from war to famine, celebrity marriage to a stock market crash. Naturally, the 'stories will not have overly particular details' but instead provide 'Universal Forms of which any particular detail would only be an example' (p. 49).

Langley's never fully realised project brings together several of Doctorow's concerns. Unsurprisingly for a historical novelist, it suggests that the past can in some way explain the present. But Langley's failed attempt to compile knowledge from newspapers whose information is current one day and destined for the garbage the next also suggests Doctorow's concerns, as identified by Wutz, with the value of the discarded, whilst its emphasis on the recurrence of events echoes what Morris has identified as Doctorow's belief in the essentially cyclical nature of

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<sup>33</sup> *HL*, p. 37.

<sup>34</sup> Wutz, p. 532. Published some six years prior to *Homer and Langley*, Wutz's ruminations on the role of garbage in Doctorow's work nevertheless prefigure the latter in many ways.

<sup>35</sup> *HL*, p. 48.

history, with mankind doomed to a possible Nietzschean fate of eternal return.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, it is a further example of Doctorow's fascination with newspapers as vehicles of information, apparent in his work from *The Book of Daniel* onwards.<sup>37</sup>

Most importantly for the focus of this chapter, however, Langley's project suggests that Doctorow, approaching the end of his career, still views the striving towards a total system of knowledge as a recurrent feature of human life, just as its failure suggests his continued scepticism that any individual or system can attain total knowledge.

However, although Langley is undoubtedly the most extreme example of a would-be encyclopaedist in Doctorow's oeuvre, the significant encyclopaedic veneer he adds to the novel does not provide sufficient justification for classifying *Homer and Langley* as an encyclopaedic narrative. A similar caveat applies to the other Doctorow narratives mentioned above, where characters' encyclopaedic instincts and practices are slightly less pronounced. Wutz's claim that some of Doctorow's novels are 'especially encyclopedic' should not therefore be understood as implying that the other works are, in some way, standard encyclopaedic narratives, but rather ones where encyclopaedism is obliquely present through a character who seeks a totalised knowledge. For however strict or lenient we wish to be with taxonomies of narrative encyclopaedism, it is clear these novels do not fulfil the majority of the criteria. Indeed, we can see that this is the case simply by taking two of the major criteria upon which Frye and Mendelson agree: the idea of the narrative as an encyclopaedia or compendium of other texts,

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<sup>36</sup> See Wutz, pp. 505–09 and *Models of Misrepresentation*, pp. 5–7.

<sup>37</sup> The importance of the press in Doctorow's work deserves a more detailed critical study than it has received to date or than can be given here. His work accommodates several positions towards the press, ranging from Daniel's cynicism over the involvement of newspapers in deciding his parents' guilt through to Billy Bathgate's naïve processing of the world through the prism of daily newspapers, and the comic shaping of the news by the unwitting assassinations an ex-journalist carries out in *City of God*.

literary styles and genres, and that of the appearance of prophecy.

A cursory glance through Doctorow's work shows that the majority of his works are written from a consistent narrative viewpoint. The favoured narrative viewpoint appears to be first person, but in works such as *Big as Life* and *Ragtime* Doctorow has also worked through a more omniscient third-person narrator.<sup>38</sup> This consistency of narrative viewpoint does not preclude polyphony, with even first-person narrators such as Billy Bathgate switching regularly between registers that range from the naïve to the cynically knowing, but it does not allow for the bricolage of styles and/or genres that marks out a text as encyclopaedic. However, there are three works by Doctorow that are marked by narrative discontinuity and stylistic variety – *The Book of Daniel*, *Loon Lake* and *City of God* – and it is to these that I will now turn.

Both *The Book of Daniel* and *Loon Lake* have narratives that veer between first and third person, creating a fractured focalization and a range of styles. *The Book of Daniel* begins as a third-person narrative, 'On Memorial Day in 1967 Daniel Lewin thumbed his way from New York to Worcester, Mass, in just under five hours', but is soon interrupted by Daniel as narrating first person: 'I mean the early morning traffic was light'.<sup>39</sup> This fracturing of the subject is further emphasised in the novel's second paragraph, when the narrator speaks of Daniel/himself as virtually one more object in a list, another product of American Capitalism:

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<sup>38</sup> *Ragtime* is, however, marked by occasional intrusions from a first person narrator, assumed to be the little boy as an older man. Phrases such as 'this was the time in our history' (p. 28) and 'Poor Father, I see his final exploration' (p. 235) remind the reader that this is, despite appearances of objectivity, a subjectively narrated/constructed history.

<sup>39</sup> *TBD*, p. 3. In this fracturing of the narrator/subject, *The Book of Daniel* mimics the Old Testament Book of Daniel, which begins in the third person, but ends in the first.

made in USA by Long Island Paper Products, Inc. This is Daniel trying one of the dark covers of the Browsing Room. (p. 3)

*Loon Lake* displays similarly fractured narration. For example, two third-person paragraphs about Joe's fears of rape and theft amongst the travelling hoboos ('He had heard of people having a foot cut off for the dollar in their show') are followed by the first-person assertion that 'I didn't want these mockeries to my own kingship of consciousness'.<sup>40</sup> A similar occurrence is when Joe's discovery of Red's life insurance is narrated in the third person, only for its narrative consequences to be narrated in the first.<sup>41</sup>

While *City of God* does not have this fractured narrator, unsure of its status as third- or first-person, it does have various first-person narrators, as well as various third-person sections, thus ensuring that, like the other two novels, it displays a range of styles and voices. Furthermore, all three of the books share a permeability to other texts and genres that is both typical of Frye's anatomy and the 'bookishness' that Clark identifies. For example, in all three novels Doctorow includes free verse poetry, ranging from Daniel's meditation on electricity, through *Loon Lake*'s various poetical interludes, to *City of God*'s 'Author's Bio' passages and Midrash Quartet interludes.<sup>42</sup> Other examples of permeability to other genres and styles include Daniel's use of history texts, Biblical passages and his parents' correspondence, Penfield and Clara's narratives in *Loon Lake*, and *City of God*'s embrace of forms such as diary, email and taped conversation.

In this permeability and in both their medley and uncertainty of narrative voices, these novels suggest the possible influence of Melville's work on Doctorow, particularly *Moby-Dick*, the original American encyclopaedic narrative;

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<sup>40</sup> *LL*, p. 18.

<sup>41</sup> *LL*, pp. 196–99

<sup>42</sup> See *TBD*, p. 232 and, for example, *LL*, pp.16–17 and *CG*, pp. 189–207 and pp. 24–28.

for what else is Ishmael but a fractured focalizer like Daniel and Joe? He instigates the narrative as a first-person account, but virtually disappears in the novel's increasing focus on Ahab, relegated to an implied presence in the third-person plural of the crew, and then wilfully obscures his identity in his final act in the chase as 'the third man helplessly dropping astern, but still afloat and swimming'.<sup>43</sup> And *Moby-Dick* is also open to a variety of genres, texts and voices, ranging from the pseudo-Shakespearean dramatic interludes and soliloquies to the science writing of the passages on cetology.

However, although the disjointed form of all three novels clearly matches that of encyclopaedic narratives, if we take the category of prophecy as a criterion of purpose or function, we see that only *The Book of Daniel* and *City of God* bear its hallmarks. For although *Loon Lake* is both stylistically and thematically complex, there is little prophetic about it, neither in the manifestation of the divining oracle, nor, to recall Frye, 'the tiny flashes of significant moments' that reveal the meaning of a civilization's progress.<sup>44</sup>

*Loon Lake's* narrated past is only some forty years prior to the moment of its composition, but that is already too great a historical distance for it to achieve the appearance of prophecy that Mendelson identifies as typical of the encyclopaedic text, despite the novel's closing biography of Joseph Korzeniowski bringing the narrated past up to the 1970s, the time of its publication.<sup>45</sup> And its moments of interpretative revelation, such as the poet Penfield's realisation that three young girls in his past may each be reincarnations of one another, or Joe's realisation of the full level of exploitation in the carnival, are always limited to the personal, not any grander societal meaning. Rather than an encyclopaedic narrative,

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<sup>43</sup> *Moby-Dick*, p. 620.

<sup>44</sup> Frye, p. 61.

<sup>45</sup> *LL*, pp. 250–51.

*Loon Lake* is, in fact, an extended pastiche of one, namely Dos Passos' *U.S.A.* For while Doctorow argues in *Creationists* that *U.S.A.* is 'a useful book to us because it is far-seeing',<sup>46</sup> that level of foresight is ultimately denied *Loon Lake*, which can only invoke the present through the distorted/distorting mirror of an allegorical past.

In contrast, that both *The Book of Daniel* and *City of God* may bear some element of prophetic vision/interpretation is suggested immediately by their titles. Archival materials show that Doctorow experimented with several titles while working on *The Book of Daniel*, including *Clemency*, *A Radical's Progress* and *Save the Isaacsons!*, so the title he eventually chose suggests a strong desire to make a clear link between his novel and the Old Testament Daniel and the prophetic visions therein. Similarly, while *City of God* does not bear a Biblical namesake, its title deliberately echoes St Augustine's treatise on:

A city surpassingly glorious [...] as it still lives by faith in the fleeting course of time, and [...] as it shall dwell in the fixed stability of its eternal seat.<sup>47</sup>

Unlike *Lives of the Poets*, which never refers to Johnson's work of the same name, both novels acknowledge the texts from which they derive their names, though with differing levels of urgency. Whereas Augustine's work is not mentioned until page 251 in *City of God*, Daniel the narrator is swift to refer to the Old Testament Daniel, quoting the *Dartmouth Bible*'s summary of it as a book whose 'dreams and visions [...] have baffled readers for centuries'.<sup>48</sup>

Daniel, in fact, soon begins to mimic the Biblical Daniel in two ways.

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<sup>46</sup> *C*, p. 105.

<sup>47</sup> Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. by Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, 1950, repr. New York: Modern Library Edition, 2000), p. 3.

<sup>48</sup> *TBD*, p. 5.



Firstly, as we have seen, in switching between first- and third-person narration, but also in using prophecy:

The summer of 1967 was just beginning. There would be a wave of draft-card burning. There would be riots in Newark and Detroit. Young people in the United States would try a form of protest originated in this century by the Buddhist monks of South Vietnam. They would douse themselves with gasoline and light matches to themselves. They would burn to death in protest. But I, Daniel, was grieved, and the visions of my head troubled me and I do not want to keep the matter in my heart. (p. 17)

In its retrospective foreseeing of the civil disturbances in the summer of 1967, this paragraph clearly fulfils Mendelson's criteria of using the recent past to give 'the appearance of prophecy'. But equally importantly, the final sentence – in its evocation of Daniel 7. 15, 7. 28 & 8. 27 – deliberately points to Daniel's sense of himself as a prophet, and the prophet here is political, responsible for interpreting the world in a time of great difficulty, a new Daniel as it were.

This conception of self as clear-sighted prophet informs both Daniel's actions and his diction. The dinner-table argument he has with his sister Susan, his conversation with Linda Mindish and his meeting with Sternlicht all see Daniel trying to prove that he sees things as they really are, that he has, to use one of the novel's refrains, got the picture. And his language, often hallucinatory and poetic, further recalls that of the Biblical Daniel by defamiliarising the normal, such as in this vision of the janitor:

Up from the alley rose Williams embracing an ashcan. Riding his great flat feet with an eagle's grace, floating his body through the air like a song. (p. 154)

Daniel underlines this defamiliarization by acknowledging that 'the real life of his

childhood [...] had become a dream' (p. 65). Even when he makes his final visit to Susan in the sanatorium, shortly before her death, he describes himself as still 'a young man trying to interpret and analyse the awful visions of his head' (p. 211). This connection to the Biblical Daniel is reinforced by the book's final words: the ending appended to the three that Daniel himself identifies (his parents' execution, Susan's funeral, leaving the library) is a prophecy quoted directly from the Biblical Daniel, words that are simultaneously a release ('Go thy way Daniel') and a vision of things to come ('and there shall be a time of trouble').<sup>49</sup>

However, while prophecy and what we might call the prophetic legacy are prominent throughout *The Book of Daniel*, its presence is not as immediately obvious in *City of God*. This is in part due to the history that the novel focuses on. Whereas *The Book of Daniel* engages with its immediate pre-history through its 'prophecy' of draft-card burnings and student riots, *City of God*, published in 2000, makes no reference to immediate pre-millennial events such as the fall of Communism, the impeachment of President Clinton, the first attack on the World Trade Center or the rise of China as an economic power. Indeed, it is hard to avoid the sensation that Doctorow is actively suppressing recent history in favour of a focus on the Holocaust and the atomic bomb, never approaching any closer to the novel's present than the 'former Guatemalan death squad commander' the ex-journalist manages to kill.<sup>50</sup>

Yet despite this absence of retrospective prophecy, we should not dismiss

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<sup>49</sup> *TBD*, p. 309 and Daniel 12. 1–9. Doctorow's use of three separate endings possibly indicates Melville's influence further by mirroring *Billy Budd's* three distinct endings, identified by Wyn Kelley as Vere's death, the newspaper report and the popular ballad. In Kelley's argument these 'three possible endings' 'give conflicting interpretations of what has happened in the story', with the popular ballad offering an alternative to the regime's monologic reading of the incident (See Wyn Kelley, *Melville's City: Literary and Urban Form in Nineteenth-Century New York* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 275.).

<sup>50</sup> *CG*, p. 263.

*City of God* as entirely free of prophecy, because, in many ways, the prophecy it does contain is more ambitious than that in *The Book of Daniel*. The prophecy that Mendelson identifies as consistent with encyclopaedic narratives is, in effect, a sleight of hand, using history and hindsight to give the author the appearance of being prophetic. What Doctorow attempts through his various narrators in *City of God* is however, closer to the interpretative role of the prophet that Frye identifies, that of explaining the progress of civilization through ‘tiny flashes of meaning’ or epiphanies.<sup>51</sup>

Thus we are led in the opening sentence back to the very beginning not of history, but of time, with the ‘singular space/time point, [...] moment/thing [...] known as the Big Bang’.<sup>52</sup> From hereon, the novel deals with the nature of creation and the intersection of science and religion, the future and tradition. What, it asks, are we to make of a belief in God and/or in an ordered universe when the ‘exponential murder of souls’ that has left ‘masses of the violently dead in our century consigned by their very numbers to the lists of anonymous oblivion’ suggests only meaninglessness?<sup>53</sup> In this modern world, science has answered the questions of the universe’s origins but cannot provide meaning, and the dominant concern is not faith but economics, represented by ‘the financial skyline of lower Manhattan’, that is ‘an island cathedral, a religioplex’ (p. 7).

Unsurprisingly, Doctorow does not provide a definitive answer to the question of life’s purpose, but the very structure of the novel draws the reader into the prophet’s task of interpreting history. What we see in doing so is that, despite senseless atrocities such as the slaughter of millions of Jews in the Holocaust and the repression of dissenters by Latin American death squads, there remain

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<sup>51</sup> Frye, p. 61.

<sup>52</sup> *CG*, p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> *CG*, p. 301.

redemptive qualities in mankind that are to be celebrated. One is the sheer inventiveness and resourcefulness that results in places such as New York, which is ‘smart, accomplished, sophisticated, and breathtakingly beautiful’ (p. 307).

Another is the humanity and courage shown by characters such as the priest who helps preserve the ghetto archives from the Nazis.

Yet perhaps the most important qualities are the tolerance and understanding exemplified by Sarah Blumenthal’s progressive synagogue and the conversion of Reverend Pemberton (Pem) to Judaism in order to marry Sarah. This unlikely love story effectively ends the novel twice, once in the marriage of Pem and Sarah, which culminates in Pem’s long rumination on what God’s purpose might be, and again in the novel’s final passage, a vision of New York as a movie in which the hero and heroine are ‘a vitally religious couple who run a small progressive synagogue on the Upper West Side’ (p. 308). Though this ending is undoubtedly an example of the sentimentalism into which Doctorow lapses throughout his career, it is also a prophecy of a better future that derives its optimism from the willingness of its characters to mimic the prophets and interpret the world around them for meaning.

Thus I believe that there is sufficient prophetic activity within *City of God* for us to continue to consider it alongside *The Book of Daniel* as an encyclopaedic narrative. And although the appearance of prophecy and disjointed texts are not, in themselves, enough for us to consider a narrative as encyclopaedic, we will see in the next sections not only that both novels also meet other of the criteria that identify encyclopaedic narratives, but also how those features illustrate ways in which encyclopaedic narratives work against the dominant culture.

### III

At the close of *The Book of Daniel*, Daniel Isaacson – student revolutionary, sometime PhD candidate, and son of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, the novel’s ciphers for the atomic spies Julius and Ethel Rosenberg – symbolically submits the text to the reader as his dissertation:

DANIEL’S BOOK: A Life Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Doctoral Degree in Social Biology, Gross Entomology, Women’s Anatomy, Children’s Cacophony, Arch Demonology, Eschatology, and Thermal Pollution.<sup>54</sup>

As T. V. Reed drily observes, this list proposes Daniel as a candidate for ‘some rather unorthodox degrees’, and shows that he has ‘like most dissertation writers [...] reached a point where the task seems rather futile’.<sup>55</sup>

However, this seemingly exhaustive litany, whose random juxtaposition of various topics resembles an encyclopaedia’s assemblage of radically different strands of knowledge into one text, actually fails to acknowledge several of Daniel’s key concerns. There is no mention here of the manipulation of historical data or the questions of innocence, guilt, madness and the uses of state power that have so obsessed him throughout his quest to ascertain the truth of his parents’ guilt or innocence. The litany is in fact Daniel’s final moment of subterfuge and subversion in a text that has constantly undercut the received historical narrative of his parents’ trial: its apparent exhaustiveness becomes a Trojan Horse, a cover under which he can smuggle the book’s real issues and concerns into the dominant culture’s prevailing discourse. Presenting itself in the familiar guise of the official

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<sup>54</sup> *TBD*, p. 318.

<sup>55</sup> Reed, p. 291.

thesis, Daniel's book masquerades as something written in 'regime language', but we the reader know that it is a subversive text that, in its resistance to official narratives, challenges the 'hegemony of enshrined or institutionalized discursive practices' that might otherwise wish to censor it.<sup>56</sup> And a key part of that challenge comes from the novel's use of encyclopaedic structures.

As noted earlier, Daniel's text employs a variety of genres, categorised by Reed as: 'drama, letters, travelogue, empirical historiography, advertising copy, poetic confession, biblical exegesis, diary, documentary, political tract, journalistic report, notes to the reader, notes to the author to rewrite previous passages, and even elements of the dissertation form itself'.<sup>57</sup> Like Daniel's own list, Reed here appears to be exhaustive, but significantly fails to mention the inclusion of either the novel's purportedly historical passages or the encyclopaedic definitions of torture methods. I will, however, focus on these two features of *The Book of Daniel* here as I believe they not only show how Doctorow's text functions as an encyclopaedic narrative, but also suggest a further criteria by which we can understand how encyclopaedic narratives relate to what Mendelson terms the 'complexities of statecraft'.

The first moment when the historical irrupts into the novel occurs when the opening account of Daniel's visit to his sister Susan, institutionalised after a recent suicide attempt, abruptly switches to Bukharin's show trial:

[...] The afternoon grew festive—

Bukharin was no angel of course. In the course of his trial he spoke of condoning the murder of Whites in the heat of the revolutionary struggle. Going down before Stalin, he felt obliged to make the distinction between murder that was politically necessary and factional terrorism.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> John G. Parks, 'The Politics of Polyphony: The Fiction of E. L. Doctorow', *Twentieth Century Literature* 37 (1991), 454-63 (p. 463).

<sup>57</sup> Reed, p. 291.

<sup>58</sup> *TBD*, p. 15.

This irruption is typical of subsequent ones in that it not only interrupts the narrative, but stops its progress: here, for example, the visit to Susan is not returned to until ten pages later, by which time Daniel has prophesied civil unrest (p. 17), recounted his childhood attendance at a march to save his parents (pp. 17–23), and mused on the repression of the Left in the aftermath of war (pp. 23–5). As a result of the dislocation and disjuncture that such passages cause, few readers of the novel can fail to notice or remember them. Yet surprisingly, many critics have tended not to focus on them beyond general explanations such as that ‘Daniel looks to history in order to find explanatory parallels’,<sup>59</sup> or that they ‘give historical, political-economic grounding to the sometimes wildly jolting, spiking fragments of storytelling’ that constitute the rest of the novel.<sup>60</sup>

However, I feel these passages are more closely connected to what Jarvis identifies as the novel’s attempt to ‘display profound continuity’ in the history of punishment, and to what Parks describes as attempts to ‘destabilize the hegemony of official history enough to open up new possibilities for interpretation’ than has so far been acknowledged.<sup>61</sup> Rather than an attempt to provide historical context or grounding, they are, in fact, eminently political, dedicated to both revealing and subverting the dominant culture’s narrative.

The main focus of the historical passages is Stalin’s show trials. This focus simultaneously provides a parallel to the Isaacson/Rosenberg trial and a direct reminder of the miscarriages of justice that the Old Left directly condoned in their uncritical allegiance to Stalin. Clearly, the show trials also furnish a precise

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<sup>59</sup> Harris, p. 214.

<sup>60</sup> Reed, p. 299.

<sup>61</sup> Brian Jarvis, *Cruel and Unusual: Punishment and US Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 2004), p. 59; John G. Parks, *E. L. Doctorow* (New York: Continuum, 1991), p. 36.

historical example of how a state can manipulate facts and the judicial process in order to prolong and preserve power, even when the price of such a decision is ‘the postponement of Marxist dreams, and the expendability of the individual’.<sup>62</sup>

However, when these examples are added to the novel’s definitions of torture methods such as smoking (p. 112), knouting (p. 132), and burning at the stake (p. 133), and the mini treatises on citizenship (p. 75) and treason (p. 173), they go beyond simple historical parallels and begin to form a virtual manual, an encyclopaedic resource, on state repression of the individual, the ultimate form of which is to take the life of the citizen. Perhaps to underline this, the torture definitions are parodic of the dry objectivity found in entries in encyclopaedias or manuals:

*Drawing and Quartering.* This particular form of execution was favoured by English monarchic government against all except the aristocratic inner circle which was allowed the dignity of simple beheading. For everyone else the method worked like this: the transgressor was hanged and cut down before he was dead. Then he was emasculated, disembowelled, and his entrails were set on fire in front of his eyes. If the executioner was merciful, the heart was then removed from the body, but in any case, the final act of the ritual was then performed, a hacking of the body into four parts, the quarters then being thrown to the dogs. Treason was the usual crime for this punishment, its definition being determined by the King’s courts for the King’s convenience.<sup>63</sup>

With their matter-of-fact detail, these passages force the reader to confront the disjunction between language and suffering. Here *emasculated* and *disembowelled* are merely words, unconnected to the pain the actual processes inflict on the condemned, and this foreshadows some of Daniel’s own difficulties in trying to convey his parents’ experience.

For what we see in the novel is Daniel struggling to approach through

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<sup>62</sup> *TBD*, p. 55.

<sup>63</sup> *TBD*, p. 77.



language the nature of his parents' suffering. In *S/Z*, Barthes argues that 'beauty cannot be described (other than by lists and tautologies); it has no referent, yet it does not lack references (Venus, the Sultan's daughter, Raphael's Madonnas, etc.)'.<sup>64</sup> A physical and psychological phenomenon for the individual, suffering similarly resists representation, particularly when it ends in the lacuna of silence created by the subject's death; yet, like beauty, it can be approached obliquely, first by references to previously existent forms, and ultimately by imagination.

Furthermore, Daniel's phrasing here reminds the reader that while language may often struggle to represent, it nevertheless remains a tool in the exercise of power. The apparent objectivity of what reads as a definition of a form of torture that Daniel may or may not be copying from a library book is undermined by the inclusion of such terms as 'merciful' and 'dignity'; this subjective language illustrates how any knowledge is, in effect, composed by a subject, and therefore brings into question the objective authority claimed by encyclopaedias and other reference works. The passage, and the final sentence in particular, remind the reader that one way in which power operates is through self-interested definition of language, and that therefore what we take as fact may be nothing more than what Parks calls the 'attempted monologue of the cultural regime',<sup>65</sup> a monologue which is antithetical to the polyphony of the encyclopaedic narrative and its implied democracy of voices.

Through such passages, *The Book of Daniel* moves beyond a simple interest in the art of statecraft and instead makes state repression of the individual, particularly through torture, its synecdochical science. This reading, in which the electrocution Daniel's parents suffer is the most modern manifestation of state repression, is supported by a passage in an early draft of the novel that clearly

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<sup>64</sup> Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 143.

<sup>65</sup> Parks, *E. L. Doctorow*, p. 35.

shows Doctorow envisaged the Isaacson/Rosenberg trial as part of a historical continuum of state repression whose object has now shifted to the Left:

The issue of the Trial, then, is never the guilt or innocence of he who is on trial, but to what extent he who is on trial is a danger to society; and it is society's prerogative, not the individual's, to make this judgement.

To illustrate our thesis let us choose at random a prominent trial from this century. Not so obvious a demonstration as the so called show trial of 1938 when Nikolai Bukharin and the others were made to confess to crimes against the Soviet Govt. justifying their execution. [...] Let us choose, say, the trial in the United States of Paul and Rochelle Isaacson, known to newspaper readers of their day as "the atom spies".<sup>66</sup>

In a novel that forces the reader to mimic Daniel's attempts to make connections, it is perhaps unsurprising that this heavy-handed exegesis was deemed unsuitable for inclusion. Yet even if we assume that the idea of the trial as part of a continuum of state repression influenced Doctorow's composition of the novel, it still fails to entirely explain the inclusion of these passages and definitions that feel so radically disjointed from the rest of the text.

One possible reason may be found by once again speculating on the possible influence of *Moby-Dick*, a novel Doctorow had read both as an undergraduate and, at the beginning of the sixties, in his role as editor at New American Library.<sup>67</sup> In Melville's novel the narrative of the Pequod's voyage is frequently interrupted by Ishmael's cetological digressions, passages which, to paraphrase Doctorow, have stoved many readers in.<sup>68</sup> The nature of these passages and the reason for their presence are, like the passages on torture and history in *The Book of Daniel*, difficult to pin down: they threaten to swamp the reader with detail

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<sup>66</sup> ELDP, 2A, 25.011, *The Book of Daniel* (early fragments with corrections and notes)—Part 1, typescript fragment numbered p. 129.

<sup>67</sup> The New American Library edition was published in 1961, some ten years before *The Book of Daniel*.

<sup>68</sup> See *C*, p. 35.

and distract them from the narrative, yet we almost instinctively understand as readers that the book would be far weaker without them. The cetological passages may make *Moby-Dick* 'an encyclopaedic farrago',<sup>69</sup> but they also help make it a more intellectually and emotionally engaging novel than any of Melville's previous seafaring tales.

I would suggest that the reason for this is that these passages that mimic the encyclopaedia's factual veneer place the narrators' individual narratives in conflict with the 'wider expanses of national and mythical history'.<sup>70</sup> It is as if these factual representations, whether of whale hunting or of state repression, are a monster that the narrators must acknowledge in order to protect their personal story and prevent it from being lost in the generalities of history. Readers of *Moby-Dick* may feel that they understand the workings of a nineteenth century whaler after reading the novel, but it is Ishmael's narrative of Ahab's pursuit of Moby Dick that forces the reader into a specific, empathic experience of being on a whaler, just as Daniel's account of his parents' trial, execution and its effects on the children forces the reader to move away from general thoughts of state repression to how it is experienced. Paradoxically, the passages that most resemble those we would find in an encyclopaedia draw attention through their defamiliarising intrusion in the narrative to what the encyclopaedia, forced into generalisations and reliance on exempla, always conceals: the individual.

And it is this resistance to the encyclopaedia's erasure of the individual that marks both the beginning and end of Daniel's quest to discover the truth of his parents' innocence or guilt. This quest, which echoes the journey made in most epics, begins in the Lower East Side and ends at Disneyland.

Daniel goes to the Lower East Side to visit Artie Sternlicht, a New Left

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<sup>69</sup> Frye, p. 311.

<sup>70</sup> Mendelson, p. 1273.

prankster and would-be revolutionary.<sup>71</sup> He discovers Sternlicht's address on a poster tube that Susan left in her car before her suicide attempt, and the tube contains the last surviving poster of Daniel's parents. This makes Daniel's visit double-edged: he not only hopes for an insight into Susan's motives for suicide, but also to discover whether or not he should surrender the poster, and symbolically the narrative, of his parents to Sternlicht's New Left.

The visit is preceded by three passages whose format of an italicised opening sentence precisely mirrors that of the entries on torture and execution methods we have seen immediately before:

*Knouting.* Knouting was the primary means of punishment for capital offences in Czarist Russia.

*Riverside Park.* It was a Saturday morning, already September.<sup>72</sup>

This similarity may be accidental, but I would argue that it suggests that everything Daniel now encounters, from execution methods to the New Left, forms part of the narrative he is constructing through his investigations. '*Riverside Park*', '*Fourteenth Street*' and '*Avenue B*' (pp. 135–37), where he finally meets Sternlicht, are entries in Daniel's quest for a totalizing knowledge of his parents' innocence or guilt.

At Sternlicht's apartment, Daniel discovers that Susan was planning to donate the 'Save the Isaacsons' poster to form part of a collage that Baby,

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<sup>71</sup> Sternlicht appears to be a portrait of Abbie Hoffmann, whom Doctorow knew as an undergraduate at Kenyon College. See *JLHC*, pp. 87–8 for a more affectionate interpretation of Hoffmann's activism than Sternlicht receives for his in *Daniel*.

<sup>72</sup> *TBD*, p. 132 and p. 135.

Sternlicht's girlfriend, is creating on the wall.<sup>73</sup> Wutz calls this collage 'a pastiche of rubbish echoing the illusion of historical progress, a palimpsest of trash reflecting on the nature of the compositional process'.<sup>74</sup> Described by Daniel as 'interesting', the 'collage of pictures, movie stills, posters, and real objects' functions as an encyclopaedia of American life that includes celebrity culture, entertainment, politics, war, resistance, pornography, punishment and execution:

Marlon Brando on his bike, [...] FDR, [...] Mickey Mouse, Gilbert Stuart's Washington with a moustache pencilled on, Paul Robeson, [...] a World War One dogfight, a chain gang working on the road, [...] a girl making it with a donkey, [...] a *Death of a Salesman* poster, [...] a black man hanging from a tree, a white man selling apples for 5 cents—<sup>75</sup>

The contents of this collage/encyclopaedia, edited here for space, may appear random, but it contains references to Daniel's parents / the actual Rosenbergs and their fate within it: Paul Robeson recalls his father's act of resistance at the Paul Robeson concert earlier in the novel; *Death of a Salesman* recalls, through Arthur Miller's biography, the McCarthy Communist witch hunt and the anti-communist hysteria that led to the Rosenbergs' execution; while the 'black man hanging from a tree' reminds us not only of summary justice and execution, but of Abel Meeropol's poem 'Strange Fruit' and, by extension, of Meeropol's adoption of the actual Rosenbergs' sons after their execution.

A poster of the Isaacsons would add to the narrative of repression contained within the collage, but Daniel refuses to donate it to the cause. Because to do so would be to admit that the collage's title, 'EVERYTHING THAT CAME BEFORE IS ALL THE SAME!' (p. 141), is correct, that there is no difference

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<sup>73</sup> An early draft of the novel was entitled *Save the Isaacsons!*, perhaps indicating a synecdochal relationship between the poster and the narrative.

<sup>74</sup> Wutz, p. 510.

<sup>75</sup> *TBD*, p. 140.

between the sanitised, Hollywood image of subversion represented by Brando in *The Wild Ones* and that of his parents' possible subversion of the USA's atomic supremacy. The collage is 'an encyclopaedic monster, a 'postmodern flattening of history and political struggle' into uniformity.<sup>76</sup> In this, it is symptomatic of Sternlicht's view of history, one in which the Isaacsons are just another pair of martyrs:

But the revolution has more martyrs than it needs. Like all the spades you never heard of murdered in their beds, and in every jail in the world, and like the millions of kids murdered in their schools, and like the people starved to death or shot or burned in Vietnam. We've got martyrs up the ass.<sup>77</sup>

By reducing everyone to the same status, Sternlicht's view of revolution and history not only elides individual experiences, but is as monologic and resistant to discourse as that of the state; as Baby comments immediately after his pronouncement on martyrdom: 'You can't disagree with Artie'. Yet significantly, Daniel does disagree with him. He subverts Sternlicht's monologic view of history by failing to donate the poster and, insisting on the possibility of difference, thereby denies the collage's claim to a total, encyclopaedic knowledge.

However, this is not just a moment of token resistance; it is also a significant moment in Daniel's encyclopaedic narrative for two reasons. Firstly, it forces both Daniel and the reader to confront the danger of the encyclopaedic project, namely that if all knowledge is collected and collated by someone else, the person who consults that encyclopaedia does so passively and is subject to the interpretations of another and the ideological biases that inform it. The encyclopaedic collage in Sternlicht's apartment suffers no dissenting voices and

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<sup>76</sup> Reed, p. 295.

<sup>77</sup> *TBD*, p. 157.

offers only an illusory liberation from history. In contrast, the encyclopaedic narrative liberates the reader by undermining claims to total knowledge and placing them in the position to interpret and make connections.

Yet this moment of rejection and independence is also significant because it relates to Daniel's growing understanding of the power of images. Occurring in the post-war period when *Life* magazine popularised the image as a form of news, the Rosenberg trial spawned numerous images that became famous, ranging from Ethel and Julius Rosenberg sitting next to one another as they heard their death sentence to their two sons in school uniform as they travelled to Washington to plead for clemency, from Sixth Avenue thronged with pedestrians on the day of the execution to Ethel Rosenberg in the electric chair. Images for Daniel, the cipher-son of the Rosenbergs, come to be the extra-literary art form that Mendelson claims always occurs in encyclopaedic narratives.<sup>78</sup>

Discussing his work in 1975, Doctorow said that he didn't 'think a writer can ignore seventy years of optical technology when he sits down and writes a book' – a quote he repeated almost verbatim in 1978.<sup>79</sup> As if to bear witness to this idea, we see throughout *The Book of Daniel* how Daniel, its supposed author, is attuned to images, a 'criminal of perception' from an early age.<sup>80</sup> The first childhood memory he recounts ends with he and Susan 'transfixed by the placards, the oversized pictures of their mother and father everywhere above the crowd' (p.

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<sup>78</sup> The significance of images is further hinted at by the fact that when Daniel first arrives at Sternlicht's apartment, he finds a journalist and photographer from *Cosmopolitan* in the room. In a scene that symbolises the extent to which revolution has already been co-opted into the narrative of corporate America, the journalist flatters Sternlicht and Baby and encourages them to strike Bohemian poses of free love on the mattress for the photographer to shoot (pp. 141–2), images which will help sell copies of the magazine, but do nothing to further Sternlicht's hoped-for revolution.

<sup>79</sup> Jonathan Yardley, 'Mr. Ragtime', in *Conversations*, pp. 7–13 (p. 10) (first publ. in *The Miami Herald*, 21 December 1975); Jared Lubarsky, 'History and the Forms of Fiction: An Interview with E. L. Doctorow', in *Conversations*, pp. 35–40 (p. 40) (first publ. in *Eigo Seinen* 124 (1978), 150–52).

<sup>80</sup> *TBD*, p. 31.

23). Mindish's arrest almost mystically coincides with 'the first television set to come to 174th Street [...] in the window of Isaacson Radio, Sales and Repair' (p. 106), and when his parents are arrested, Daniel sees their image on television or in the press as being 'like the world had finally agreed to what I knew – that we were important people' (p. 96). In a further manifestation of the power images have over him, Daniel conflates 'a 1930s prison movie' in which the prisoner 'was shaking the bars of his cell' with the imagination of his parents in jail: 'All night [they] rose and fell on the bars, like the horses in a merry-go-round, pulling themselves up and sliding down with their hands attached to the bars' (p. 163).

This pervasiveness of images comes, however, to trouble him, and the older Daniel grows increasingly aware of how they can be manipulated. We are told on the first page that 'nothing about his appearance was accidental'. He remembers how, in the newspapers, an 'image grew' of his father as 'a master spy and ringleader' (p. 165), while Daniel's return to Washington, DC reminds him how he and Susan's vigil outside the White House became 'a famous news picture. It appears as if we're looking through prison bars' (p. 260). *Image* and *picture* become loaded terms, words that imply an ability to be manipulated. Susan's parting phrase to Daniel, 'You get the picture' (p. 8), repeated several times throughout the novel, comes to be simultaneously a bequest of the poster, a statement inviting him to see things as they really are, and a challenge to him to defend and uphold the image of their parents.

This sensitivity to images reaches its climax in Daniel's visit to Disneyland. Embodying Hardack's argument that encyclopaedic narratives are travel narratives in which 'male protagonists undertake reflexive and often doomed journeys



seeking some form of chivalric or absolute knowledge',<sup>81</sup> Daniel journeys to Disneyland in the hope of hearing from Selig Mindish, the family friend who informed on his parents, whether or not they really were guilty. As Mindish is senile, the encounter is frustrating and non-revelatory, yet it once more involves Daniel rejecting an encyclopaedic vision that claims to offer a complete knowledge.

As one of the book's most complex moments, the visit to Disneyland has unsurprisingly attracted much critical attention. Interpreting Daniel's visit, Parks sees Disneyland as 'a place where fantasies can be acted out, but fantasies that are carefully created by the corporate sponsors filling the void of a traditionless world'. This foregrounding of the link between the corporate world and the dominant culture's view of history is echoed in Harpham's argument that Disneyland epitomizes 'the connection between desire and complicity', and in Reed's view that it represents 'the triumph of capitalist technological will over history and memory, the utter commodification of experience'. Jarvis offers an interesting Foucauldian interpretation in which Disneyland can be read as a 'a species of Cold War panopticism', both 'a symbol of capitalism and the capital of symbolism [...] figured as prison house of signs, a space of social control', and Pepper develops this to argue that Disneyland for Daniel 'reinforces the centrality of the capitalist state to the broader project of social control', with 'punishment [...] *explicitly* linked to the machinations of state-sponsored corporate capital'.<sup>82</sup>

While I think the critics above are correct to infer these meanings from Daniel's text, and that Fowler is wrong to dismiss it as 'a set-piece introduced into the book solely because the opportunity intrigued the social theorist in Doctorow,

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<sup>81</sup> Hardack, p. 131.

<sup>82</sup> Parks, *E. L. Doctorow*, p. 50; Harpham, p. 87; Reed, p. 300; Jarvis, pp. 72–73; Pepper, p. 484.

for it makes no contribution to the plot', there is little doubt that the task of interpretation is made easier by its form, what Godden describes as 'an essay on popular culture', the last of the 'three sub-genres at work in the text'.<sup>83</sup> This is one of the moments in the novel where Daniel's text comes closest to that of an actual doctoral thesis, but whereas his earlier entries on capital punishment remained largely abstract, this section is based on his own experience. Thus, Daniel in Disneyland finally brings his full powers of analysis both to his own experience and to the dominant culture and the images through which it seeks to indoctrinate the populace.

Like the collage in Sternlicht's apartment, Disneyland represents an image-based encyclopaedic vision of history, a claim of total knowledge, but the difference in this encounter is that Daniel has gained confidence in his ability to analyse. He rejects the encyclopaedic vision offered but does so in the discourse of the academy, a defender of a different knowledge. He sees Disneyland's 'radical process of reduction [...] with regard to the nature of historical reality' and acknowledges that its 'technique of abbreviated shorthand culture for the masses' can be 'extremely useful both as a substitute for education and, eventually, as a substitute for experience', but he resists its draw.<sup>84</sup> Knowing both the power of images and the ease with which they can be manipulated, Daniel fails to be seduced. Instead, he reveals this pseudo-pastoral playground to be an encyclopaedia of half-truths that deliberately elides and suppresses those aspects of both history and the present that threaten to disrupt the sanitised image of them that

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<sup>83</sup> Douglas Fowler, *Understanding E. L. Doctorow* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1992), p. 37; Richard Godden, 'So That the Dead May Not Be Killed Again: Mailer, Doctorow and the Poetics of a Persecuting Society', in Michael Klein, ed., *An American Half-Century: Postwar Culture and Politics in the USA* (London: Pluto Press, 1994), pp. 30–53 (p. 46). The two other subgenres Godden identifies are 'A Dictionary of Corporal Punishment' and 'A True History of the Cold War'.

<sup>84</sup> *TBD*, p. 295.

it wishes to project. As Parks argues, Daniel ‘dares to reveal the secrets of America to America itself’ and thus becomes ‘an even more subversive traitor’ than his parents, a ‘modern-day Poe’.<sup>85</sup>

So although Daniel’s quest may not end with the desired truth of his parents’ guilt or innocence, it gives him knowledge of how power operates. By rejecting the totalizing, encyclopaedic visions of both New Left poseurs like Sternlicht and of the military-industrial complex as represented by Disneyland, he frees himself to subvert the narratives that others wish to impose upon him by creating a narrative in which all claims to total knowledge are seen to be inherently suspect. Thus, he can finally depict the execution of his parents and reveal the narrative of power that the state wishes to suppress, and, at the end of the novel, leave the library stacks and join in the attempt to overthrow the university. After all his learning he is free to participate in the attempt to subvert power, a radical at the close of a radical book.

In ending thus, Doctorow’s novel suggests an addendum to the criteria that identify an encyclopaedic narrative. Illustrating that the art of statecraft is partly directed at the creation of a totalizing knowledge, what Doctorow’s novel highlights through Daniel’s experience is that the encyclopaedic narrative’s central character will eventually resist being subsumed into that totalizing narrative of everything. If, as Barthes argues, ‘The *Encyclopedia* is a huge ledger of ownership’,<sup>86</sup> then *The Book of Daniel* shows that it is possible to resist having one’s personal history owned and explained by others. Such resistance may not always bring the character any closer to a definitive truth, but it also allows him/her to evade the shackles of anyone else’s version of it. In *The Book of Daniel* this

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<sup>85</sup> Parks, *E. L. Doctorow*, p. 41.

<sup>86</sup> Roland Barthes, ‘The Plates of the Encyclopedia’, trans. by Richard Howard, in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. by Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982; repr. London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 218–35 (p. 222).

leads to a democratic attitude towards the interpretation of history, rejecting the self-serving narrative of the state, but as we shall see in *City of God*, the focus switches to the need to resist any monologic interpretation of the world, whether political or otherwise.

## IV

After *The Book of Daniel*'s encyclopaedic, dissynchronous narrative and *Loon Lake*'s pastiche of Dos Passos' encyclopaedism, Doctorow's work in the eighties and nineties appeared to retreat from the use of experimental narrative forms, favouring a largely traditional first-person viewpoint in *World's Fair*, *Billy Bathgate* and *The Waterworks*. Even *Lives of the Poets*, whose internal intertextuality makes it experimental in structure, consists of seven pieces that are all narrated from consistent narrative viewpoints. Yet in 2000, Doctorow published *City of God*, a millennial novel that, as we have seen above, appears in both its range of styles and its intimations of prophecy to represent a return to encyclopaedic narrative.

Many critics responded negatively to this reversion to an earlier style. A. O. Scott dismissed the book as 'a work of profoundly uneasy conscience' and asked 'where is the novel?', while Julian Keeling damned it as 'a loose, postmodern jumble that stands outside [Doctorow's] canon' and hoped only that it 'might encourage him to write another book [of] the kind [...] he usually writes, the kind he's best at'.<sup>87</sup> More positive responses were still marked by a suspicion of the

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<sup>87</sup> A. O. Scott, 'A Thinking Man's Miracle', *New York Times*, March 5 2000  
<<http://www.nytimes.com/2000/03/05/books/a-thinking-man-s-miracle.html>> [accessed 16

novel's 'portentous title', its 'lengthy disquisitions on the philosophy of language and the nature of the universe' and its ruminations on a 'fragmented, secular society' whose fate has 'been gleefully spelled out on the idiot-boards of postmodernity for years'.<sup>88</sup> Even the most positive responses claimed the book suffered from overwriting, with images fluttering 'down like sycamore leaves with no obvious reason for their existence beyond the writer's own enthusiasm'.<sup>89</sup>

Later academic responses have tended to centre on religious interpretations of the novel, most of which is far from disinterested. Bawer begins by bemoaning Doctorow's career-long 'tendentiously leftist view of American life and values', dismisses *City of God* as a 'mishmash', and devotes several pages to Doctorow's 'offensive' misinterpretation/mishandling of Episcopalian traditions, which is 'like a colorblind man writing about a rainbow'.<sup>90</sup> Bergström is more positive about the book, but her reading is little short of ideologically motivated in its readiness to claim Doctorow as both a Kabbalist and Gnostic.<sup>91</sup> Although Wilde avoids such a monologic reading, seeing it as a novel whose 'combination of crisis of religious faith and search for social justice [...] helps to open up the emotionally charged relationship between religion and politics to reconsideration, [...] emphasizing the ethical commitments [...] shared by a range of faiths while questioning the

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June 2009] (para. 9 of 9); Julian Keeling, 'You want God?', in *New Statesman*, 24 April 2000 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/200004240054>> [accessed 16 June 2009] (para. 6 of 6).

<sup>88</sup> James Hopkin, 'God knows', *Guardian*, 3 June 2000 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2000/jun/03/fiction.reviews2?INTCMP=SRCH>> [accessed 16 June 2009] (paras. 2–4 of 6).

<sup>89</sup> Unattributed, 'The Divine Tragi-Comedy Played on God's Empty Stage', in *Independent*, 8 April 2000 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/the-divine-tragicomedy-played-on-gods-empty-stage-625479.html>> [accessed 16 June 2009] (para. 9 of 10).

<sup>90</sup> Bruce Bawer, 'The faith of E. L. Doctorow', *Hudson Review*, 53 (2000), pp. 391–402.

<sup>91</sup> Bergström, p. 165.

importance assigned to dogma',<sup>92</sup> his interpretation remains largely centred on questions of faith and spirituality, as if Doctorow had written not a novel but a guide to religious belief and ethical practice at the end of the millennium.

It is not my intention to argue that *City of God* is completely unconcerned with questions of faith. Indeed, evidence in Doctorow's archive suggests that he had been considering a theological novel since *Billy Bathgate*, with a note considering the possibility of 'a theological gangster novel (with music?)',<sup>93</sup> and this interest in the theological is further evidenced by the original title of *The Waterworks*, which was *The Soul*. However, what is perhaps most interesting for the purposes of this study of encyclopaedism is not these early signs of interest in theology, but *The Soul*'s structure.<sup>94</sup>

For while *The Soul* maintains the same plot focus as *The Waterworks*, its form is markedly different, eschewing conventional narrative for the experimental form and structure of *Loon Lake* and *The Book of Daniel*. In addition to chapters that offer additional first-person narrators to McIlvaine (including Sarah Pemberton, Emily Tisdale, and Reverend Grimshaw), there are third-person chapters by a 'redactor', diary entries, correspondence between Sarah Pemberton and Donne, newspaper obituaries, catalogue entries from an art exhibition and even a fax or email that implicates Doctorow as the assembler of this 'false document':

To: ELD  
Re: Mission Home for Little Wanderers  
93rd Street and the East River

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<sup>92</sup> Lawrence Wilde, 'The Search for Reconciliation in E. L. Doctorow's *City of God*', *Religion and the Arts*, 10:3 (2006), pp. 391–405 (pp. 403–04).

<sup>93</sup> ELDP, 2A, Box 35.011 (*Billy Bathgate* notebook and notes), unnumbered page.

<sup>94</sup> The following references are to ELDP, 2A, 38.003–4, *The Waterworks* (early draft titled *The Soul*) – Parts 1 and 2.

We can find no plans or deeds for this lot, only a reference of intent in a charter of incorporation, dated 1857, which lists the owner as the Gentle Shepherd Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb.<sup>95</sup>

Why Doctorow eventually employed a more traditional narrative form in *The Waterworks* is a question I will address in the next chapter, but *The Soul's* bricolage of styles and voices clearly illustrates that Doctorow was experimenting with a return to an encyclopaedic narrative long before he wrote *City of God*. The reason for this return to encyclopaedic narrative in *City of God* is, I would argue, because it is the form which best allows him to combine a myriad of topics as diverse as science, cinema, music, justice, economics, democracy, and the overlap between reality and fiction. When this experimental form and breadth of subject matter are taken into account, it seems little more than an act of critical tunnel vision for critics like Bergström and Bawer to concentrate solely on questions of faith. For Doctorow here is not only 'working out in detail the implications of the science-humanities rift that has been simmering in his fiction for at least twenty-five years',<sup>96</sup> but questioning all claims to monologic certainties, and it is his return to the encyclopaedic form that makes this possible.

Published nearly thirty years after *The Book of Daniel*, *City of God* does not share the former's visceral interest in the operation of power. Instead, Doctorow's concerns appear to have shifted from the political to broader questions of knowledge and truth, in which the narrative offered by the state is merely one of many narratives whose monologic certainties are brought into question. In this, *City of God* supports not only Lyotard's familiar assertion that, in the postmodern era, the 'grand narrative has lost its credibility', but also his claim that 'eclecticism

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<sup>95</sup> ELDP, 2A, 38.004, typewritten draft, p. 223.

<sup>96</sup> Wutz, p. 512.

is the degree zero of contemporary general culture'.<sup>97</sup>

Central in this is the role played by Pem, the disillusioned priest. Appointing himself a self-declared 'Divinity Detective' after the theft of the cross from his church,<sup>98</sup> Pem fits Mendelson's category that each encyclopaedic narrative should have a character who behaves like one in a different genre to the encyclopaedic, in this case a crime novel. Here that affiliation to another genre manifests itself in both Pem's actions and in his reading choices:

I'm lying, Lord. [...] The paperback detective he speaks to me. His rod and his gaff they comfort me. And his world is circumscribed and dependable in its punishments, which is more than can be said for Yours. (p. 9)

Yet the crime and the detection process, despite leading Pem to meet the Blumenthals, become increasingly irrelevant as the novel progresses: although the stolen cross is discovered on the roof of the Reform Synagogue, the question of who placed it there is never answered, just as the identity of Joshua's murderer later in the novel is never discovered. Indeed, when Pem journeys to Vilnius, his detection work is devoted to discovering the whereabouts of the ghetto archive for which Joshua was searching, not solving Joshua's murder. As detective, Pem is the latest in the succession of hermeneuts that Morris identifies as central to Doctorow's work,<sup>99</sup> but his interpretations never lead to the complete knowledge that solving either crime would constitute. This mirrors the way in which, in the absence of proof of God's existence, Pem is fated to continue interpreting the Bible without knowing whether it is true. Like Daniel, Pem begins the novel aspiring to

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<sup>97</sup> Jean François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) p. 37; Lyotard, 'What Is Postmodernism?', trans. by Régis Durand, in *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 76.

<sup>98</sup> *CG*, p. 19.

<sup>99</sup> See *Models of Misrepresentation*, p. 11.



knowledge and complete understanding, a total epistemology, but he eventually realises that he is instead fated to hermeneutics, a constant process of interpretation, with knowledge ultimately undecidable.

This burden of constant interpretation is not, however, limited to Pem's crisis of faith. Mendelson's claim that encyclopaedic narratives contain a branch of science as a synecdoche of knowledge is brought to mind throughout *City of God*, which, as we have seen in Section II, introduces scientific theory from its opening line:

So the theory has it that the universe expanded exponentially from a point, a singular space/time point, a moment/thing, some original particulate event or quantum substantive happenstance, to an extent that the word *explosion* is inadequate, though the theory is known as the Big Bang.<sup>100</sup>

There is an echo here of Lyotard's claim that science must resort to narrative in order to explain itself, but what this passage also shows is the inadequacy of language. The terms used here are deliberately vague, providing a superficial impression of knowledge that fails to withstand scrutiny. And if language, our chief apparatus for deciphering the world, cannot be trusted, then we must by extension also be distrustful of narrative in general and forever keep in mind that its claims to truth are vague and circumstantial at best, always open to interpretation.

Science in *City of God* therefore becomes not only a synecdoche for knowledge, but for the doubt that must accompany any claim to knowledge. Thus although Einstein intrudes in the narrative to gloss his theory of relativity, he also reminds the reader that the theory of the Big Bang may, in fact, simply be the latest in a long line of myths of creation, and that 'there could in theory be alternatives to

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<sup>100</sup> *CG*, p. 3.

what is' (p. 60).

Philosophy fares little better than science in its attempt to impose a grand narrative or explanatory scheme. Wittgenstein's appearance in the novel, with his logical approach to language and thought, serves to illustrate the ultimate undecidability of things and their inability to be fully explained by narrative, even for something as simple as a statement of being:

I ask you—what could be more basic to meaning than the proposition that a thing cannot be both itself and not itself? Is that not the beginning of all logic, does it not in fact express the fundamental structure of the human mind? Yet here they do one experiment proving that light [...] partakes of mutually exclusive states of being!

Oh these European scientists [...] they insist [...] that not only light but all matter [...] is similarly indeterminate. (p. 216)

Even something as basic as structure at a molecular level is, it seems, unknowable, a question of interpretation.

As we can see, none of the narratives offered by church, science or philosophy can be taken as definitive, but Doctorow also shows that the same applies to the narratives promoted by those in power. For although *City of God* may not display the same level of political urgency of *The Book of Daniel*, it remains interested in statecraft and is subversive of state narratives.

The actual discourse of the state, as manifested by the writing of its civil servants, enters into the novel in what Bakhtin would term the 'voice zone' of the Third Reich, which threatens to reduce history and faith to a precise but lifeless taxonomy: 'Torah text pointers silver, Torah text pointers wood, Torah text pointers silver or wood in the shape of small hands with index finger extended' (p. 213). Doctorow echoes this taxonomic litany later in the novel when government officials at JFK airport inspect the ghetto archive:

The inspectors unwrap the packages to find sheaves of paper bound in twine, booklets, manuals, folders, rolled-up blueprints, diagrams, stapled documents, envelopes of various sizes, each labelled in a small, neat Yiddish script. They open every packet, every envelope. Then [...] they agree among themselves that there is nothing here of interest to them. (p. 229)

Both passages could be dismissed as lists empty of meaning, but I feel Doctorow is drawing attention to the way the state operates. The state here can only catalogue, an act which appropriates each item into the state narrative, but in doing so it reduces everything to the same uninterpreted level of flatness that Daniel found in the collage in Sternlicht's apartment and in Disneyland. The state's representatives may decide 'there is nothing here of interest to them', but in actual fact, these objects are full of history and could prove decisive in the quest to bring a Nazi war criminal to justice. Coming almost immediately after Wittgenstein's observation about the dual nature of light, we can see that the items catalogued also possess a dual nature. While for the state they seem to be little more than objects or documents, for other people they are imbued with historical meaning, a narrative that the state cannot see. It is a question of readiness to go beyond what things appear to be, and to interpret instead.

This ontological phenomenon of being two things at once is seen elsewhere in the novel, often in relation to people and their dealings with the state. In 'Sarah Blumenthal's Conversation with Her Father', which recounts life in the Jewish ghetto under the Nazis, her father acquires a dual identity to escape death: for the Nazis he is 'Yehoshua Mendelsohn', whilst simultaneously being the Blumenthals' son in his own knowledge, just as Srebnitsky the tailor both is and is not his grandfather. A similar phenomenon is observed in the two war criminals the 'ex-*Times* guy' kills, both of whom are living under assumed identities, and in the

‘Moira’ story that Everett develops into a gothic tale of switched identities, with a lover undergoing plastic surgery in order to take on the features of the husband he cuckolds (pp. 38–40).

Everything then is open to interpretation, without a fixed meaning, and this applies to the novel itself, because the presence of Everett the novelist problematises the status of virtually every event and voice in the novel. For while we are clearly conscious as readers that we are encountering a fiction authored by Doctorow, even when the subject matter is clearly based on historical events or personages, Everett’s presence produces a *mise-en-abyme* effect whereby we are never sure which parts of the narrative are ‘authored’ by Everett. Thus, for example, we cannot know for certain whether Einstein and Wittgenstein are supposed to represent actual historical figures as written by Doctorow, or simply to represent Everett’s attempts to represent them.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, though we see Sarah’s reactions to Everett’s drafts of her father’s story, we cannot be sure that the ghetto story we read is the one to which Sarah reacts, nor how much Doctorow has drawn upon the Kovno ghetto diary by Abraham Tory that Sarah identifies as its possible inspiration.

In Doctorow’s return to the encyclopaedic form, we see therefore that all narratives are found to be susceptible to alternative readings, and this ultimately weakens any pretence to total knowledge, whether from a religion, a science or a government. In its incredulity towards all such metanarratives, *City of God* not only recalls Lyotard, but also Doctorow’s proposition that ‘there is only narrative.’<sup>102</sup>

Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that Doctorow’s novel may not be as democratic in its attitude towards all narratives as the proposition that ‘there is only

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<sup>101</sup> See, for example, Bergström, p. 155 and Wutz, p. 512 for differing reactions to the ontological status of Einstein and Wittgenstein within the novel.

<sup>102</sup> *JLHC*, p. 163.

narrative' would suggest. Just as *The Book of Daniel* had photographs as its extraliterary art form, Doctorow's later encyclopaedic novel introduces both music and cinema. The novel is largely admiring of the former, but scathing of the latter:

Movies are using up the cities, the countrysides, the seas, and the mountains. Someday every inch of the world will be on film. The planet will have flattened into an enormous reel.<sup>103</sup>

This nightmarish vision is of a world drawn into one narrative, represented through the monological eye of the camera. Cinema, the dominant narrative form of the twentieth century, is seen as inferior to fiction: 'Fiction goes everywhere, inside, outside, it stops, it goes, its action can be mental' while 'Film [...] never ruminates' and 'tends to the simplest moral reasoning'. When the two forms meet in film adaptations, 'the narrative simplification of complex morally consequential reality is always the drift' of the film (p. 242).

Yet even here the level of Doctorow and/or Everett's antipathy to cinema is open to interpretation. Wittgenstein is allowed to declare a deep love for the way films 'make themselves out of the actual materials of the world' (p. 176), and, in its use of narrative jump cuts and flashbacks, *City of God* is as clearly influenced by film as both *The Book of Daniel* and *Loon Lake*. Doctorow may resist film's colonisation of culture, but in the novel he appears to accept it as virtually inevitable in the new millennium: the final, prophetic chapter ends with the outline not of a novel or a story but of a movie. But rather than sound a note of despair, in his choice of 'a vitally religious couple who run a small progressive synagogue' as hero and heroine, Doctorow refers back to Pem/Joshua and Sarah, and thereby embeds a point of interpretation, a signal that whether the monologic narrative is

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<sup>103</sup> *CG*, p. 122.

from state, religion, science or cinema, there will always be someone to subvert and challenge it with a different opinion or interpretation, forever unsettling its aspiration towards presenting a totalized knowledge of existence.

Parks argues that all of Doctorow's work shows that the 'task of narrative is to disrupt or dismantle the prevailing "regimes of truth"',<sup>104</sup> but through this extended analysis of *The Book of Daniel* and *City of God* I hope to have shown that this is particularly true of these encyclopaedic narratives. Through their disruption of and resistance to official versions of knowledge purveyed by the dominant culture, they are among Doctorow's most successful and most democratic, the most elusive of the 'series of counternarratives threaded into the master text of state power' that constitutes his oeuvre.<sup>105</sup>

For if, as Doctorow argues in the introduction to *Creationists*, 'we know by what we create',<sup>106</sup> then the encyclopaedic form is one that forces the reader to constantly confront how meaning is created via interpretation. In piecing together narrative from the jagged, jumbled fragments of these novels, the reader is effectively placed in the position of someone asked to imagine the world only from the contents of an encyclopaedia. Faced with such a challenge, we soon realise that knowledge cannot be total but always suffers from lacunae, and this leads us to realise that any claims to monological certainties are therefore flawed and always open to other contending interpretations. Forever in the process of being constructed, these subversive novels resist claims to total knowledge, which in their insistence on a single interpretation of history/reality remind us of the 'regime language that derives its strength from what we are supposed to be', and are instead

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<sup>104</sup> Parks, *E. L. Doctorow*, p. 18.

<sup>105</sup> Wutz, p. 520.

<sup>106</sup> *C*, p. ix.

written in the 'language of freedom whose power consists in what we threaten to become'.<sup>107</sup>

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<sup>107</sup> *JLHC*, p. 17.

## 2: Disreputable Poetics: Genre and Submerged Politics

### I

In 'Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory', Raymond Williams observes that 'most writing, in any period, including our own, is a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture'. According to Williams' theory, literature and the other arts become a 'central articulation' of the dominant culture, so that they more often than not reinforce pre-existing values and norms (including those of the residual culture that the dominant allows to survive). Although there may be an 'emergent sector' that challenges the dominant, Williams notes that this 'is always, in fact, quite rare', and is usually suppressed.<sup>1</sup> In this reading, literature seems to be a practice far removed from that envisaged by Shelley in his romantic, revolutionary ideal of poets as the unacknowledged legislators of mankind, and is instead a conservative, sometimes nostalgic enterprise that serves to affirm the dominant culture by faithfully mirroring the world as it is and thereby reinforces the dominant culture as the true nature of reality.

Taking Williams' idea, we can suggest that there may be a correlation between the popularity of certain kinds of literature and the faithfulness of its reflection of a dominant culture's values. For example, part of the success of Ian Fleming's James Bond may be explained via its underlying promise that, in the Cold-War era, Britain remained a key 'arbiter and mediator', capable of confounding attempts 'to tamper with the uneasy balance of power between East

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<sup>1</sup> Williams, pp. 44–45.



and West'.<sup>2</sup> The relation between popular literature and the affirmation of existing values is further emphasised by Cawelti in his study of genre fiction:

Formula stories affirm existing interests and attitudes by presenting an imaginary world that is aligned with these interests and attitudes [...] By confirming existing definitions of the world, literary formulas help to maintain a culture's ongoing consensus about the nature of reality and morality.<sup>3</sup>

Cawelti's insight not only emphasizes the conservative elements within genre fiction, but also how such conservatism serves to reinforce the existing beliefs of a culture: a western will not only affirm the progress of civilization, but will affirm the progress of the particular civilization that produced the author; a detective novel shows society under threat from the criminal, but the balance of power is restored by the crime's solution and the criminal's apprehension or demise. Although Cawelti appears to be critically neutral about the consequences of this need to reaffirm existing structures, whether societal or novelistic, Moretti argues that this 'incarnates a paralysis and a regression of the novel's cultural model', which virtually denies the novelist's right to interrogate the society in which they

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<sup>2</sup> Barry Curtis, 'War Games: Cold War Britain in Film and Fiction', in *Cold War Modern: Design 1945–1970*, ed. by David Crowley and Jane Pavitt (London: V&A Publishing, 2008), pp.122–27 (pp. 123–24).

<sup>3</sup> John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 36. Cawelti uses the label 'formula fiction' for what most critics refer to as 'genre fiction', that is fiction which, through its use of recurrent plot elements and character archetypes, can be distinguished into separate genres such as detective, spy, romance, horror, science fiction, etc. Chris Baldick defines this fiction as 'the kind of story that offers readers more or less what they would expect upon having read similar books before', as opposed to literary fiction, which 'is expected to go beyond generic boundaries and offer more original imaginative exploration' (*The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 140). The overwhelming popularity of genre fiction compared to more literary fiction can be easily ascertained by a look at most lists of any year's bestselling books. See, for example, Simon Rogers, 'Top-selling 100 Books of All Time' and the accompanying data, *Guardian*, January 1, 2011 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2011/jan/01/top-100-books-of-all-time#data>> [accessed 15 March 2011].

live.<sup>4</sup>

Whether one shares Cawelti's equanimity or Moretti's pessimism, there seems little doubt that genre fiction is a form that often serves to perpetuate existing values, and therefore is representative of the way in which, as Williams argues, literature can consolidate the values of the dominant culture. Given this, it may appear baffling that Doctorow, a novelist who sees the writer's project as subverting the dominant culture, should be attracted to the very models of writing that appear to strengthen it. Doctorow's comment in a 1983 interview with Larry McCaffery that, when writing his first novel, he 'liked the idea of using disreputable genre materials and doing something with them' has been quoted often enough to become a critical commonplace, yet critics have done little to scrutinise further the potential reasons behind Doctorow's use of generic tropes, or analyse the consequences thereof.<sup>5</sup>

Bevilacqua's analysis of how *Welcome to Hard Times* employs the western genre to revise the myth of the American family and the settlement of America, and Diemert's interpretation of *The Waterworks* as a detective story in which the puzzle is less connected to crime than to the Gnostic's search for meaning are notable exceptions to this lack of critical engagement.<sup>6</sup> Among Doctorow's monographers, Tokarczyk engages most seriously with his use of genre, but her view that Doctorow's adaptation of genre fiction represents an 'effort to balance

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<sup>4</sup> Franco Moretti, *Signs Taken for Wonders: On the Sociology of Literary Forms* (London: Verso, 1983, repr. 2005), p. 141.

<sup>5</sup> Larry McCaffery, 'A Spirit of Transgression', in *Conversations*, pp. 72–87 (p. 77) (first publ. in *Anything Can Happen: Interviews with Contemporary Novelists*, ed. by Tom Le Clair and Larry McCaffery (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1983)).

<sup>6</sup> Winifred Farant Bevilacqua, 'The Revision of the Western in Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*', *American Literature*, Vol. 61, No. 1 (March, 1989), 78–95; Brian Diemert, 'The Waterworks: E. L. Doctorow's Gnostic Detective Story', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Winter 2003, 352–73.

desire for a wide audience with commitment to excellent work'<sup>7</sup> seems designed more to reinforce her characterisation of him as a 'sceptically committed' midfiction writer than to elucidate any deeper purpose.

This lack of critical scrutiny of Doctorow's genre fiction may, in part, be due to the perception that genre fiction is inherently conservative, and this – somewhat ironically given postmodernism's erosion of the boundaries between high and low culture – therefore works against the critical perception of Doctorow as a radical artist best typified by *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*. It is as though genre – with its implication of pandering to the popular tastes mirrored in airport fiction and bestseller lists – is a dirty secret that only need be briefly acknowledged before discussion can shift to more important literary topics untainted by the touch of populism or any suggestion of being lowbrow. Compared to Doctorow's use of history, genre is a 'disreputable' facet of his work, unworthy of serious discussion and analysis.<sup>8</sup>

Yet genre fiction and Doctorow's use of its tropes should not be dismissed so readily, for as I will illustrate below, two of his novels that most resemble genre fiction may, in fact, be as subversive and as challenging to the dominant culture as the more overtly political novels, such as *The Book of Daniel* and *Ragtime*, for which Doctorow is famous. Part of the reason for this lies in the particular relation between America and the novel. As Fiedler argues, America and the novel have effectively co-existed since their inception, and this historical coincidence has, to a certain extent, created a link between the novel and American identity.<sup>9</sup> Prior to the innovations of the Modernists, the novel was the one literary form in which

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<sup>7</sup> Tokarczyk, p. 176.

<sup>8</sup> Doctorow himself has promoted the notion of genre as 'disreputable', repeating this description in two subsequent interviews. See *Conversations*, p. 136 and p. 193.

<sup>9</sup> Leslie A. Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel*, 3rd edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), pp. 23–30.

Americans could lay claim to producing genuinely different models specific to the American experience and free of the weight of a pre-existing European tradition: in the nineteenth century, American authors helped establish the parameters of both the detective novel and the western. This innovation also continued after Modernism with the development of the gangster novel and American authors' significant contributions to the evolution of both horror and science fiction. Genre fiction can be seen therefore as a means by which American authors not only staked a claim to literary independence from pre-existing European models, but a space in which they could explore American life and culture. As a result, American genre fiction comes to serve as a repository of national myth, consolidating the dominant culture's beliefs and values at the same time as it disseminates them.<sup>10</sup>

That this correlation between American myths and genre fiction is a major attraction for Doctorow in working within these 'disreputable' genres is suggested by his words immediately after his much-quoted comment to McCaffery: 'I liked invention. I liked myth.'<sup>11</sup> This view is further supported by his comments in a 1993 interview with Wutz, where he acknowledges the Americanness of certain varieties of formula fiction and categorises the 'American affection for gangsters' as 'characteristically American' and the 'myth of the West' as 'ours, and ours alone'. His assertion that 'popular genres are meaningful and a source of analysis of who we are and what we're doing' further emphasizes the link between genre fiction and its embodiment of the dominant as experienced by the populace.<sup>12</sup>

Given these comments, it is unsurprising that we find Doctorow using the generic frameworks of his first two novels to interrogate American myths and their

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<sup>10</sup> For a more extended discussion of how popular literature has influenced American self-perception, particularly in the nineteenth century, see Philip Fisher, *Hard Facts: Setting and Form in the American Novel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 3–21.

<sup>11</sup> *Conversations*, p. 77.

<sup>12</sup> Michael Wutz, 'An Interview with E. L. Doctorow', in *Conversations*, pp. 191–200 (pp. 193–4) (first publ. in *Weber Studies* 11 (Winter 1994), 6–15).

contribution to the dominant. As I have argued elsewhere, one way of reading Doctorow's first novel *Welcome to Hard Times* is not simply as a nihilistically violent revisionist Western, but as a critique of the role of capitalism in the formation of the USA.<sup>13</sup> But his second novel, the science-fiction thriller *Big as Life*, also contains political critique of the USA. Beginning with the sudden, mystical appearance of two giant aliens in New York Harbour, it traces the lives of three characters, Red, Sugarbush and Creighton, against a backdrop of the sinister rise of NYCRAID, 'the New York Command Research and Defence', whose mission is:

1) the military defense of the city and the eastern seaboard, 2) the scientific investigation of this phenomenon, and 3) the control of disease and crime, the expedition of economic recovery, and the maintenance of morale.<sup>14</sup>

Although this novel has some fine moments of invention, not least its original premise of the aliens experiencing the passage of time at a different speed to humans, Doctorow has refused to allow the work to be republished. This may, in part, be due to some lackadaisical writing. However, it is also possible that NYCRAID's too obvious correlation to the military-industrial complex makes the novel a failure: it becomes too overtly political to be a successful genre novel, but perhaps too wildly fantastic in its invention per the dictates of science fiction for its politics to be taken seriously.

That Doctorow's fiction continued to be politically engaged after these two genre novels is evident from his next book, *The Book of Daniel*, but the realism of that work suggests he had lost faith in the ability of genre novels to 'do something

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<sup>13</sup> See Nicholas Murgatroyd, 'A Better Lie of the West: E. L. Doctorow's *Welcome to Hard Times*', *U.S. Studies Online* 15 (Autumn 2009) <[http://www.baas.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=182%3Aissue-15-autumn-2009-article-3&catid=15&Itemid=11](http://www.baas.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=182%3Aissue-15-autumn-2009-article-3&catid=15&Itemid=11)>.

<sup>14</sup> *BL*, p. 57.

serious' and serve as successful vehicles for political fiction. Yet in 1989, over two decades after *Big as Life*, Doctorow produced *Billy Bathgate*, a novel whose tale of life with gangsters appears to represent a return to the materials of 'disreputable genres', and then followed this in 1994 with *The Waterworks*, a detective novel. As I will show in Parts II and III of this chapter, both of these genre novels constitute political critiques of the last administrations of the Cold War, but first I wish to illustrate how their form was itself dictated by the cultural and critical politics of the Reagan era.

Williams' theory that literature contributes to the dominant culture of its day and constitutes an affirmation of its values poses an implicit question: what does the writer do who does not wish to contribute to the dominant culture but to interrogate its values instead? How can one write novels that question the dominant's cultural and political status quo without being excluded by the very hegemony you seek to undermine? This problem, according to Whalen-Bridge, is made particularly acute in America by a perception that literature should be 'disinterested', meaning that fiction deemed to be political in intent 'is frequently given sub-literary status by critics, scholars, and other taste-makers'.<sup>15</sup>

That Doctorow struggled for much of the eighties to resolve the question of how an American writer could be politically engaged without being aesthetically dismissed is apparent from both his essays and his fiction. For example, in 'The Beliefs of Writers', a speech he gave in 1984, Doctorow highlights the impasse political fiction has reached in America. Drawing attention to the dominant's stranglehold over all of American literature, Doctorow argues that 'some of the serious works of American fiction, no less than our kitsch, in some ways serve as

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<sup>15</sup> Whalen-Bridge, pp. 1–2. Whalen-Bridge, it should be noted, uses Doctorow as an exemplar of the conflicted political writer in the USA today in the introduction to his book.

repositories for our myths': in other words, the conservative values of genre fiction identified above have now infected all areas of American literary production.<sup>16</sup> This statement proves the springboard to a gloomy prognosis that American writing has become a 'reduced literature', typified by 'an exhaustion of the hope that writing can change anything' (p. 112). In what is a similar argument to Whalen-Bridge's, Doctorow argues that part of the reason for this state of affairs is that critics suppress dissent by effectively dismissing any work that is deemed political:

There is no poetics yet devised by American critics that would treat engagement as anything more than an understandable but nevertheless deplorable breakdown of form. [...] [E]xamination of society within a story [...] places a work in aesthetic jeopardy. [...] In fact, if the subject of a novel is about a labor union organizer, for example, or a family on welfare, it is assumed to be political, that is, impure, as for example a novel about life in a prep school is not. Political is always to be distinguished from what entertains. [...] I think it is no slander to suggest that some of our critics are more likely to accept the political novel and even acclaim this or that example as long as it is written by a foreigner about a foreign country. This is analogous to President Reagan's support of workers' movements as long as they are in Poland.<sup>17</sup>

Whether Doctorow was correct or not in his arguments would take a far more wide-ranging survey of the American novel in the Cold-War era than is possible within this thesis, but his argument shows his evident frustration with the difficulty of writing socially engaged novels in Cold-War America, particularly in its later stages. For although the example of critical hostility he cites is Robert Alter's description of *The Book of Daniel* as 'flawed by a spirit adversarial to the Republic' (p. 113), Doctorow's reference to a novel about a union leader – and, in the same speech, his subsequent lionisation of the 1930s as a more socially involved era – suggests that the book whose critical reception was paramount in his thinking was *Loon Lake*.

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<sup>16</sup> 'The Beliefs of Writers', in *JLHC*, pp. 103–16 (p. 110).

<sup>17</sup> *JLHC*, pp. 112–3.

Like its immediate predecessor, *Ragtime*, *Loon Lake* features unions, effectively dramatising the Flint, Michigan strikes of 1936. Though *Ragtime*'s portrait of sweat shop work eventually cedes to the representation of Tateh as the mythical self-made entrepreneur of American legend, even this heavily romanticised portrait had proved sufficiently provocative for Kramer to accuse Doctorow of 'fierce ideological arrogance'.<sup>18</sup> It is therefore unsurprising that *Loon Lake*'s far less romanticised depiction of Fordist assembly lines in an age when the 'workforce was more robotised, more alienated from work' and workers 'who could not work fast enough would be sacked' both drew a harsher critical reception and failed to match *Ragtime*'s popular success.<sup>19</sup>

John Sutherland, for example, found *Loon Lake* 'a disappointing performance' and accused Doctorow of being 'a novelist of ostentatiously displayed social conscience', while John Lucas found the novel 'too insistent, too hectoring, too much in love with its own diagnosis of cultural life' for it to work.<sup>20</sup> Pearl Bell's unrelentingly negative review concludes that: 'Doctorow has nothing new to add to his old radical litany. Trapped in the simpleminded futility of his political dogmas, he is doomed to sing the same old songs over and over again.'<sup>21</sup>

A slightly more forgiving analysis can be found in Diane Johnson's extended review in *The New York Review of Books*, which identifies that Doctorow's work suffers from the conflict between art and politics: 'The special trial sent to Doctorow is to be not only righteous but an artist, thought since Victorian times to

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<sup>18</sup> Siegel, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Paul Mason, *Live Working or Die Fighting: How the Working Class Went Global* (London: Harvill Secker, 2007), p. 257 & p. 267.

<sup>20</sup> John Sutherland, 'Masters of Art', *London Review of Books* 2: 24, 18 December 1980, p. 17; John Lucas, 'Dust Behind the Dream', *Times Literary Supplement*, Nov. 7 1980, p. 1250.

<sup>21</sup> Pearl K. Bell, 'Singing the Same Old Songs', in Siegel, pp. 89–92 (p. 92) (first publ. in *Commentary*, October 1980).



be antithetical.’<sup>22</sup> However, although Johnson sees certain qualities to admire in *Loon Lake*, overall she finds the novel ‘constrained by an ideology which explains or invokes the experience of only some Americans, without having the exemplary power of an ambiguous fictional world to expand the experience of others’.<sup>23</sup> Even Doctorow’s most positive reviewers found the novel ‘may try to do too much’.<sup>24</sup> For example, while largely uncritical of *Loon Lake*’s ‘ideological slant’, Lehmann-Haupt noted that its ‘existential adventure’ and its ‘tract on history [...] to some degree [...] cancel one another out’.<sup>25</sup>

Doctorow appears to have anticipated this negative critical response to the novel’s political content in an interview with Victor Navasky around the time of *Loon Lake*’s publication:

It seems to me more of a comment on our time than on anything I have written that a novel that contains concern for our society is seen to be unusual. [...] *Moby-Dick* is a political novel. *The Scarlet Letter* is a political novel. [...] But to think that I’m writing to advance a political program misses the point. To call a novel political today is to label it, and to label it is to refuse to deal with what it does.<sup>26</sup>

This comment clearly foreshadows his thinking in ‘The Beliefs of Writers’ at the same time as it offers a corrective to those critics who would dismiss him as simply a Leftist ideologue: rather than promoting a specific ‘program’, Doctorow claims to have been more interested in using fiction to express a social concern, which, while of necessity a political act, hardly makes him Kramer’s ‘laureate [of] the “bad”

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<sup>22</sup> Diane Johnson, ‘Waiting for Righty’, *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 6 1980, pp. 18–20 (p. 18).

<sup>23</sup> Johnson, p. 20.

<sup>24</sup> Paul Gray, ‘The Nightmare and the Dream’, *Time*, September 22, 1980 <<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,952761-1,00.html>> [accessed 15 November 2010] (para. 6 of 6).

<sup>25</sup> Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, ‘Loon Lake’, *New York Times*, September 12, 1980 <<http://www.nytimes.com/1980/09/12/books/doctorow-loon.html>> [accessed 15 November 2010] (paras. 10–11 of 11).

<sup>26</sup> Victor Navasky, ‘E. L. Doctorow: I Saw a Sign’, in *Conversations*, pp. 59–63 (p. 61) (first publ. in *New York Times Book Review*, 28 Sep. 1980, pp. 44–45).

America’.

Nevertheless, Doctorow appears to have been genuinely stung by the reaction to *Loon Lake*, and troubled by the question of how to write political fiction and still be taken seriously as an artist. This is evident in his next two works, *Lives of the Poets*, published in 1984 (the same year as Doctorow’s ‘The Beliefs of Writers’ address), and *World’s Fair* a year later, both of which can be read as *Künstlerromane* that question the role and the nature of the writer in the USA.

In the title novella of *Lives of the Poets*, we encounter Jonathan, the narrator of ‘The Writer in the Family’, as a mature writer. As we saw in the introduction, the child Jonathan realises that he is ‘being implicated’ by his aunts and uses imaginative writing as a means to assert his independence from them.<sup>27</sup> However, this essentially positive affirmation of the possibilities of fiction to assert ‘the language of democracy’ does not find an echo in ‘Lives of the Poets’, which instead questions the extent to which the writer can be politically or socially engaged. Despite being a successful novelist, the adult Jonathan finds that living in a nation whose ‘President embraces sociopaths wearing medals of murder on their chests’ leads to chronic writer’s block and worries that ‘something really serious has happened to me. It is possible I’ve become estranged from my calling’.<sup>28</sup>

After various reflections on the role of the writer in Reagan-era America, Jonathan eventually finds a form of political engagement, housing a family of Latin American immigrants who have fled their country in response to US political intervention there. However, this does not appear to provide any kind of release from his writer’s block. Though the novella does end with an image of writing, the writer is not Jonathan but the immigrant family’s small boy:

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<sup>27</sup> *LP*, p. 13.

<sup>28</sup> *LP*, p. 131.

Little kid here wants to type. OK, I hold his finger, we're typing now, I lightly press his tiny index finger, the key, striking, delights him, each letter suddenly struck vvv he likes the v, hey who's writing this? every good boy needs a toy boat, maybe we'll go to the bottom of the page get my daily quota done come on, kid, you can do three more lousy lines<sup>29</sup>

Susan Brienza claims that with this image '*The Lives of the Poets* ends with joyous, childlike pleasure in writing combined with a metaphorical scene of the truly engaged, witnessing writer',<sup>30</sup> but I would argue that this is a wilful misreading, achieved only by Brienza's failure to quote anything after 'hey who's writing this?'. For this image startlingly dramatises the impasse that political fiction has come to in the Reagan era: Jonathan's decision to be politically active does nothing to resolve his block; he feels as equally robbed of control ('hey who's writing this?') by this new political engagement as he does by the government, and the lines that he produces are meaningless, destined to receive no audience. Though '*Lives of the Poets*' examines and dramatises the problem of writing socially responsible fiction in the USA, it can offer no solution: any delight here in writing is not Jonathan's but the child's, the repeated 'vvv' a symbol not of release but of repetitive, irresolvable conflict.

Charting the early boyhood and growth towards writing of Edgar, Doctorow's semi-autobiographical narrator, *World's Fair* appears a less agitated work. Perhaps unsurprisingly for a novel about a young boy, the majority of the book resembles a *Bildungsroman*, but its final section carries it into the sphere of the *Künstlerroman*. This is brought about firstly by Edgar's essay 'on the theme of the Typical American Boy' in the latter stages of the novel, which aims both to

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<sup>29</sup> *LP*, p. 145. Doctorow's novella ends here, without a full stop.

<sup>30</sup> Susan Brienza, 'Writing as Witnessing: The Many Voices of E. L. Doctorow', in Siegel, pp. 193–215 (p. 210–11) (first publ. in *Traditions, Voices and Dreams: The American Novel Since the 1960s*, eds. Melvin J. Friedman and Ben Siegel (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1995), pp. 168–95).

please its audience and be socially responsible through its mix of potentially pleasing dicta such as ‘He roots for his home team in football and baseball but also plays sports himself’, with less typical notions such as ‘If he is Jewish he should say so. If he is anything he should say what it is when challenged’.<sup>31</sup> This latter demand is a manifestation of Edgar’s guilt at denying his religion to two local hoodlums who mug him at knifepoint shortly before he writes the essay (pp. 236–7), but it shows the freedom that writing offers: though speaking out in defence of one’s beliefs, what Doctorow has called bearing witness, is a dangerous act, writing makes it possible. Through writing, Edgar manages to imply what he could not say openly, namely that he is Jewish and believes in free speech.

While Edgar’s prize of an honourable mention – losing out on first prize to an essay that speaks optimistically of the future of America – may be Doctorow’s ironic comment on the reception of such attempts to bear witness, the essay does win Edgar tickets to visit the World’s Fair of the title, which provides inspiration for the book’s key moment in terms of its role as *Künstlerroman*.

On this, his second visit to the fair, Edgar takes his family with him. Stopping at the Westinghouse building, which has a sponsored time capsule designed to show future people ‘what about our lives we thought meaningful’ (p. 283), Edgar hears his father wonder why the capsule includes nothing ‘about the great immigrations that had brought Jewish and Italian and Irish people to America or nothing to represent the point of view of the workingman’ (p. 284). The final two pages of *World’s Fair* see Edgar create his own time capsule in response. By producing this capsule, which operates as an alternative text of the present to that sponsored by Westinghouse, Edgar determines himself as an artist whose narrative can run in counterpoint to that offered by the dominant culture’s controlling

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<sup>31</sup> *WF*, p. 244.

interests. The objects he deposits mostly offer insights into the poverty of his life in the Bronx, though the 'hand-written four-page biography of the life of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, for which I had gotten a grade of 100' (p. 287) may be designed to act as a corrective blueprint for the conduct of future presidents. However, there is one object Edgar deposits that is significant for Doctorow's vision of the artist in America, and it is the one he cannot bring himself to part with: a ventriloquism manual.

Edgar has been practising ventriloquism throughout the later stages of the book, and justifies his retrieval of the time capsule after burial in order to save the manual with the observation that it seemed 'a waste of a book to bury it like that' (p. 288). However, more than simply preventing waste, his refusal to bury the manual signals his artistic future:

I remember the weather that day, blustery, cold, the clouds moving fast. The dead leaves flew in the gusts, and the great trees creaked in Claremont Park. My way home headed me into the wind. I put my hands in my pockets and hunched my shoulders and went on. I practiced the ventriloquial drone. I listened for it as I walked through the park, the wind stinging my cheeks and bringing a film of water to my eyes. (p. 288)

In this, the novel's final paragraph, the opening declaration of 'I remember' confronts us with the voice of the mature writer, whom all the biographical detail in the novel invites us to identify as Doctorow. The acute observation of his surroundings bears the hallmarks of the epiphanic moment when the artist realises his vocation, but in the headwind Edgar battles against, we see that that vocation will involve a struggle against the prevailing forces. Most significantly, the artistic vocation he is practising as he walks away is that of speaking in a voice that appears not to be his own. Thus the culmination of the two *Künstlerromanne* in which Doctorow has meditated on the artistic consciousness in America proves to

be an embrace of the ventriloquist's art, the suggestion that to write political fiction in America, you need to disguise it.

Ventriloquism is an act Doctorow would perform in his subsequent two novels, *Billy Bathgate* and *The Waterworks*, partly through his skilful deployment of first-person narrators. Yet ventriloquism in these novels works on another level, that of speaking through what, *pace* Bakhtin, we could term a 'generic speech zone' in order to convey a different message to the one customarily expected by that genre's readership. In doing so, he follows a tradition established by Melville and Hawthorne, that of being 'an outwardly conventional author who smuggles into his stories dark, unpopular truths',<sup>32</sup> a process Melville described as 'hoodwinking the world'.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, as the remainder of this chapter will show, although Doctorow draws on genre fiction as a repository of American myth in these two novels, the political content he smuggles within them invokes an older American tradition that relates to the democratic idealism of the American Renaissance and makes them, like *Moby-Dick*, what Whalen-Bridge terms 'submerged political novel[s]' in which 'political content dives beneath an ocean of literariness'.<sup>34</sup> The novels' resemblance to and use of the materials of genre fiction models may give them certain likenesses to products of the mass culture that Franco Moretti typified as 'the culture of unawareness',<sup>35</sup> but they actually contain some of Doctorow's sharpest critique of the American system and the dominant role of capitalism within it. Examining first *Billy Bathgate* and then *The Waterworks*, I will show how they

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<sup>32</sup> Michael T. Gilmore, *American Romanticism and the Marketplace* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Herman Melville, 'Hawthorne and His Mosses', *The Literary World*, August 17 and 24 August 1850, 125–27 and 145–47, repr. in *Billy Budd and other prose pieces* ed. by Raymond Weaver (London: Constable, 1924), pp. 123–43 (p. 139).

<sup>34</sup> Whalen-Bridge, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> *Signs Taken for Wonders*, p. 148.

both slip through the ‘imaginary boundary’ between politics and art ‘that continues to shape our experience in innumerable ways’,<sup>36</sup> embodying a disreputable poetics that is as equally subversive as Doctorow’s encyclopaedic narratives.

## II

Doctorow’s first act of ventriloquism after *World’s Fair* was *Billy Bathgate*, a novel written in the generic speech zone of the crime novel, specifically its subgenre of the gangster novel. That this change in style was in part a reaction to the cultural politics of the Reagan era has already been outlined above, but in this section I wish to show more specifically how Doctorow’s use of the materials of the gangster novel allowed him to create a submerged political critique of the Reagan administration, and how his use of *Moby-Dick* as an intertext transforms that political critique into a wider meditation on the nature of democracy and of power.

*Billy Bathgate* is marked out as a gangster novel by its focus on the gangster Dutch Schultz. However, although the organised crime milieu is familiar from both classic gangster films and novels such as the original *Scarface*, Doctorow makes several changes that disrupt the conventions of the genre. The first and most obvious change is the novel’s narration in the form of a boy’s own tale, which widens it from a simple crime novel into a *Bildungsroman*. Other changes to the genre’s conventions are Doctorow’s decision to focus on the decline of Schultz’s power rather than his ascendancy, and the fact that it transforms *The Godfather*’s basic model of ‘a tale of family succession’ where strength lies in togetherness and

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<sup>36</sup> Whalen-Bridge, p. 7.

family loyalty into a far more ruthless version in which the son-figure, Billy, learns to outlive the previous generation via a greater use of self-interested cunning.<sup>37</sup>

This undeniable level of self-interest on Billy's part is one of the reasons why both Parks and Tokarczyk discern a connection between the novel's politics and those of the Reagan era, which Parks labels 'an age of acquisitiveness and greed, of takeovers and buyouts, of sellouts and money grubbing'.<sup>38</sup> Although Parks argues the novel is 'another corrupt version of the American romance of wealth' (p. 106), his reading, unlike Tokarczyk's, remains largely generalised and avoids specific details of the Reagan presidency. Tokarczyk however, in her chapter 'Gangsters, the 1980s, and Greed', sees the novel as a satire on 'the Wall Street and Savings and Loans scandals of the 1980s'.<sup>39</sup> She also claims that

in conceiving of Billy as a performer, the figure of Ronald Reagan comes to mind. Reagan was an actor-president who was able, among other things, to balance the often conflicting demands of social and fiscal conservatives in his party. (p. 138)

Yet although this reading of Billy as a Reagan surrogate is not entirely without substance, there seems to me to be a much clearer case, both internally and externally, for arguing that another figure in the novel is supposed to represent

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<sup>37</sup> Cawelti, p. 53. Doctorow's archive suggests he may originally have intended Billy to be Schultz's abandoned son, with, for example, his notebook for the novel including the question 'Does he give Drew a baby as perhaps Young Dutch did his mother?', and the note 'last line idea? – My mother came with me to the cemetery and we put bud flowers on my father's grave.' (ELDP, 2A, 35.011 (*Billy Bathgate* notebook and notes)).

<sup>38</sup> Parks, *E. L. Doctorow*, p. 119. *Billy Bathgate* appears to have been published too late for inclusion in Fowler, Harter & Thompson or Levine's monographs. It is discussed in Morris, but his reading is concerned purely with Derridean questions of meaning. Harris' failure to include the novel in his 2002 study of the political novel suggests he failed to recognise the novel's submerged politics.

<sup>39</sup> Tokarczyk, p. 144.



Reagan: the central gangster, Dutch Schultz.<sup>40</sup>

Cawelti speculates that ‘the fascination with limitless criminal power in the new crime formulas’ is symptomatic of ‘the public’s reluctant awareness of the uncontrollable power of violence in the hands of the government’,<sup>41</sup> and several comments Doctorow made around the time of *Billy Bathgate*’s publication actively encourage the formulation of a link between Schultz’s behaviour as chief gangster, and Reagan’s behaviour while in power. For example, in 1989’s ‘Commencement’, a speech he gave at Brandeis University, he highlighted the ‘gangsterdom of spirit’ that had ‘been set loose in the last several years [...] under the power and principles of political conservatism’,<sup>42</sup> while in 1992’s ‘The Character of Presidents’ he called Reagan a ‘fervent charmer’ under whose rule the USA was ‘released into our great decade of deregulated thievery’.<sup>43</sup> A further encouragement to read Schultz as Reagan comes from the fact that, as J. G. Ballard points out, Reagan’s last film role prior to becoming California governor was ‘the brutal crime boss he played in the 1964 movie, *The Killers*’.<sup>44</sup> And in Schultz’s tendency to reminisce about better days for his business and his self-proclaimed lack of intelligence but simultaneous faith that his instincts are right, such as when he miscalls Billy ‘his prodigy’ instead of ‘protégé’,<sup>45</sup> we see a clear echo of the ‘heartfelt pieties and simplistic reductions of thought’ and ‘misquotations and exaggerations’ that Doctorow identified as central to the Reagan image.<sup>46</sup> Yet perhaps the most obvious clue lies

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<sup>40</sup> The historical Schultz, born Arthur Flegenheimer, was one of the few Jewish gangsters. The extent of his control over the Bronx and its popular imagination is suggested by Edgar in *World’s Fair* when he notes that his ‘library was not far from the late Dutch Schultz’s old beer barns’ (p. 233).

<sup>41</sup> Cawelti, p. 78.

<sup>42</sup> *JLHC*, pp. 81–90 (p. 86).

<sup>43</sup> *JLHC*, pp. 91–102 (p. 96).

<sup>44</sup> J. G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition*, (London: Cape, 1972; rev. ed. London: Flamingo, 2001), p. 168.

<sup>45</sup> *BB*, pp. 128–29.

<sup>46</sup> *JLHC*, p. 95.

in Reagan and Schultz's shared nickname, 'Dutch'.<sup>47</sup>

Part of the way in which these equivalences between Schultz and Reagan become politicised is through Doctorow's decision to set the novel in the Depression era, as opposed to the more contemporary settings of such novels as Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*. As Doctorow argued in 1992, Reagan headed 'a devastating assault on the remedial legislation that had been enacted from the New Deal to the Great Society'.<sup>48</sup> This assault, described by Busch as 'a revival of classical free-market economic thinking for the first time since the Great Depression', constituted a re-embrace of the pre-Keynesian economics that Reagan had studied at college.<sup>49</sup>

So although the novel's setting in 1935 may at first appear symptomatic of the 'inherently backward-looking' neokitsch aesthetic of the Reagan era, which 'fed upon the cultural debris of the past', it actually serves a serious political purpose.<sup>50</sup> By ironically placing the Reaganite gangster in the very era that Reaganomics sought to emulate by stripping away the social and economic reforms of the intervening years, Doctorow makes Schultz's rages against government interference emblematic of Reagan's desire to see 'the free market of the pre-New Deal era [...] revived',<sup>51</sup> which some economists argue helped cause a 'silent depression'.<sup>52</sup> Reagan's obstinate conservatism and rejection of the social progress made by liberalism is further mirrored in Schultz's obstinate refusal to change the

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<sup>47</sup> For an account of how Reagan acquired this nickname, see John Patrick Diggins, *Ronald Reagan: Fate, Freedom, and the Making of History* (New York: Norton, 2007), p. 59.

<sup>48</sup> *JLHC*, p. 96.

<sup>49</sup> Andrew E. Busch, 'Ronald Reagan and Economic Policy', in Paul Kengor and Peter Schweizer, eds., *The Reagan Presidency: Assessing the Man and his Legacy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), pp. 25–46 (p. 26).

<sup>50</sup> Sidney Blumenthal, 'Reaganism and the Neokitsch Aesthetic', in Sidney Blumenthal and Thomas Byrne Edsall, eds., *The Reagan Legacy* (New York: Pantheon, 1988), pp. 251–94 (p. 260).

<sup>51</sup> Blumenthal, p. 257.

<sup>52</sup> Busch, p. 37.

way he runs his business post-Repeal:

In Mr Schultz's mind his enterprise was an independent kingdom of his own law, not society's, [...] it was all the same to him whatever was legal or illegal, he would run things the way he thought they ought to be run.<sup>53</sup>

This is only one of several equivalencies between Schultz and the Reagan administration. I do not wish to suggest that Doctorow sought to accuse Reagan of the literal murder and racketeering that Schultz commits in the novel, but Schultz's crimes do become grotesque parallels of the Reagan administration's own practices, their 'gangsterdom of spirit' referred to earlier. For example, Schultz's arranged murder of window cleaners (pp. 71–2) in a dispute over union rights can be seen as paralleling Reagan's determination that 'excessive union demands would not find favor or comfort in his White House',<sup>54</sup> while Schultz's pathological aversion to paying income tax reflects Reagan's own crusade against that form of taxation. Similarly, in Part Two of the novel, Schultz's financial help to the poor farmers in order to secure their favourable opinion when he is on trial in the local courthouse recalls the way Reagan's enormous tax giveaways helped secure his re-election by creating working class Republicans: it is surely deliberate that when Schultz opens an account at the country bank in order to facilitate these payments to the farmers, the metaphor Doctorow chooses to describe the signing of the papers is of the documents being 'executed in a hush, as if a state treaty were coming into effect'.<sup>55</sup>

Other parallels in the book go beyond the area of Reagan's economic and labour policies and relate instead to Reagan's use of religion and his resistance to

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<sup>53</sup> *BB*, p. 25.

<sup>54</sup> Busch, p. 34. One of Reagan's first shows of strength as president was his firing of the striking air traffic controllers in 1981.

<sup>55</sup> *BB*, p. 128.

co-operation with Congress. Religion enters *Billy Bathgate* through Schultz's baptism as a Roman Catholic. In the novel, this speedy and dubious conversion is ostensibly in order to gain the protection of the Italian Mafia, and Billy sees it as nothing more than a business transaction, with Schultz 'appropriating Catholicism' (p. 176) in the same way he appropriates everything else. However, considered in the light of the Reagan presidency, this baptism could be seen to represent Reagan's chameleonic dealings with different branches of Christianity, not least the Roman Catholics, in order to garner support for his policies. For example, Diggins argues that Reagan had something of a 'carefree attitude toward religion', and 'looked to religion less as a source of divine guidance than as a bulwark against the power of the state', both of which descriptions could equally apply to Schultz.<sup>56</sup>

Just as there is a parallel between Schultz's and Reagan's attitudes towards religion, Schultz's refusal to co-operate with other gangs is symptomatic of the 'idea of self-reliance, rugged individualism' that Doctorow identified as 'the truth that underlay the entire administration'.<sup>57</sup> For Reagan, this unwillingness to co-operate or compromise took several forms, one of which was his attempt to change the judiciary through his direct appointment of judges, whilst another was his ongoing attempts to bypass the will of Congress, best typified by the establishment of the "'shadow" organisation known as the *Enterprise*' that would lead to the Iran-Contra scandal.<sup>58</sup> With this in mind, the novel's trial episode, where Schultz is acquitted despite overwhelming evidence, can perhaps be read as a partial allegory of the Iran-Contra hearings, while Schultz's determination to assassinate Thomas

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<sup>56</sup> Diggins, p. 22 & p. 32.

<sup>57</sup> *JLHC*, p. 85.

<sup>58</sup> Ryan J. Barileaux and Christopher Kelley, 'Ronald Reagan, Iran-Contra, and Presidential Power', in Kengor and Schweizer, eds., *The Reagan Presidency*, pp. 115–30 (p. 125).

E. Dewey, the prosecutor, can also be read as a parallel of Reagan's determination 'to influence the future direction of constitutional interpretation' and ensure 'the enactment of the president's conservative vision on the courts' by judicial appointments and the consequent silencing of dissenting voices.<sup>59</sup>

With the tracing of these various parallels between Reagan and Schultz, I hope to have shown how Doctorow submerges a novel about the Reagan administration within his gangster fiction. However, in doing so, Doctorow seeks to do more than simply satirise an American president for whom he had a rather obvious antipathy, creating instead a novel that serves as an investigation into the nature of American democracy. In this, he not only follows in the tradition of *Moby-Dick's* submerged politics, but actively invokes it.

As I argued in the introduction, Melville's influence on Doctorow is apparent from the outset of his career, and can be discerned in the encyclopaedic structure of *The Book of Daniel* and *City of God*. Occasional phrases in the early workings for both *Billy Bathgate* and *The Waterworks* give clear evidence that Melville was also on his mind in the planning stages of those novels. Doctorow's idea to write *The Waterworks* as a circadian novel with the same 'one-day span' as *The Confidence-Man* clearly never came to fruition.<sup>60</sup> However, the workings of *Billy Bathgate* show Doctorow was toying with the idea of writing a nineteenth-century style narrative, and his cryptic handwritten note 'Moby Dick – cherry tree Starbuck' suggests the Melville work he aimed to emulate in this novel was *Moby-Dick*.<sup>61</sup>

Prominent among the several parallels to *Moby-Dick* is Billy's narration,

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<sup>59</sup> Mitch Sollenberger, Jack Rossotti, and Mark J. Rozell, 'Reagan and the Courts', in Kengor and Schweizer, eds., *The Reagan Presidency*, pp. 93–114 (p. 108).

<sup>60</sup> ELDP, 2A, 39.005 *The Waterworks* (notebook, notes, mss pages, mostly WW) – Part 2, unnumbered page.

<sup>61</sup> ELDP, 2A, Box 35.012 (*Billy Bathgate* unidentified draft with corrections and notes – Part 1), unnumbered notebook page. There is, of course, no cherry tree in *Moby-Dick*, though Doctorow is perhaps misremembering the dialogue between the Pequod's three mates when Stubb wishes 'for one red cherry ere we die' (*Moby-Dick*, p. 622).

which, like Ishmael's, is made possible only 'because one did survive',<sup>62</sup> with Billy's escape from the slaughter of the gang at the Palace Chophouse being the equivalent of Ishmael's escape from the Pequod's destruction. Yet this coincidence is not the only link between the two narrators. Doctorow describes Ishmael as 'logorrheic', producing a narrative that 'bounds forward from the discussion of things',<sup>63</sup> a description which could equally apply to Billy and his narrative, whose logorrheic discussion of things, and garbage in particular, is one of the focuses of Wutz's essay. A further similarity is that both narrators manage, through frequent present tense interjections, to highlight that their narratives are composed significantly posterior to the events they relate.

Were the similarities in narrative styles all that linked the two novels, it would be difficult to substantiate a claim that *Moby-Dick* acts as a crucial intertext for *Billy Bathgate*. Yet through imagery, event and language, Doctorow establishes numerous other parallels between the two novels that make such an intertextual relationship difficult to ignore. One such parallel is suggested by the fact that, unusually for a gangster novel, *Billy Bathgate* begins not in the city but on a boat, thereby immediately making the gang a crew and Schultz its captain. This nautical relation frames the narrative of Billy's time with the gang: when Billy spots the gang's assassins escaping near the end of the novel, he notes that their car 'fishtails' before disappearing, a verb that suggests a whale before it sounds;<sup>64</sup> and, in what is surely a clear echo of *Moby-Dick*'s ending when Ishmael floats on the waves to finally be rescued as 'another orphan',<sup>65</sup> Billy spends the night after the gang's murders on top of a building, floating metaphorically above the city, and

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<sup>62</sup> *Moby-Dick*, p. 625.

<sup>63</sup> *C*, p. 44.

<sup>64</sup> *BB*, p. 302.

<sup>65</sup> *Moby-Dick*, p. 625.

describes himself as ‘sobbing and sniffing like a wretched orphan’.<sup>66</sup>

Although there is not scope in this chapter to fully detail the list of further parallels between the two novels, I would point briefly to the correlation between the number of Schultz’s lieutenants and Ahab’s harpooners, which is achieved only through Doctorow’s invention of the character Irvine; the possible correlation between Schultz’s baptism of convenience and that of Ahab’s baptism of his harpoon ‘in nomine diaboli’;<sup>67</sup> the surprising revelation that Schultz, like Ahab, is married to a wife fated to wait in the background; and the way in which Billy’s narration of Bo Weinberg’s death not only mimics Ishmael’s Town-Ho story in being a retrospective narration-within-the-narration, but shares its theme of mutiny.

However, the parallel that most clearly establishes *Moby-Dick* as an intertext and converts this genre novel into a submerged political one is the triumvirate of Schultz, Abbadabba Berman, and Billy, who I would argue correspond to Ahab, Starbuck and Ishmael.

Prone to rages that are followed swiftly by moments of reflection, constantly fearful of betrayal, incapable of ever looking anything other than ‘shaggy’ and untamed, Schultz is, like Ahab before him, a Prometheus struggling to bend the forces of democracy to his will.<sup>68</sup> The world is ‘smeared with his characteristic rage’,<sup>69</sup> but like Ahab’s before him, Schultz’s anger is both destructive and creative, and so infectious that it affects everybody in his organisation: even the lowly chef in one of his restaurants mirrors his boss in being ‘a perpetually angry man who blew into flares of rage like [...] flames that flew up in [...] fat drippings’ (p. 76). So in Schultz we see an Ahabian monomania that, despite its destructive

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<sup>66</sup> *BB*, p. 306.

<sup>67</sup> *Moby-Dick*, p. 532.

<sup>68</sup> In this, Schultz is typical of the 1920s gangster figure who, as Cawelti notes, ‘never became assimilated into an upper-class life-style but remained an unregenerate barbarian’ (Cawelti, p. 60).

<sup>69</sup> *BB*, p. 4.

tendencies, virtually mesmerises the gang and tugs them deeper into his lawlessness, just as the crew of the Pequod are drawn into Ahab's mad, relentless pursuit of the whale.

Billy's conflicting relationship with Schultz, alternately attracted and terrified, re-enacts what Anthony Hutchison identifies as the characteristic feature of American political novels, which are 'characterized by the tension between [...] a "conflicted narrator" and an ambivalently viewed central character who is the prime focus of the narrative', the template for which 'is inaugurated with Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*'. As Hutchison goes on to argue, in this template the narrated character becomes 'the embodiment of a "totalizing" [...] even "totalitarian" logic that the narrating subject finds both deeply unnerving but also undeniably compelling' and that logic is often viewed culturally 'in terms of "corruption"'.<sup>70</sup>

But if in this analysis we see the Schultz/Reagan character as embodying the attractiveness of the demagogue, we should also take into account that Billy is equally attracted to Abbadabba Berman, Schultz's right-hand man. Where Schultz is passionate and destructive, Berman is a rationalist, convinced that numbers and logical reason can explain everything. In this, he echoes Starbuck's role towards Ahab in *Moby-Dick*.

From one perspective, we can apply Larzer Ziff's description of Starbuck as 'the model democrat' to Berman, a Platonist trying to shed the light of reason in the Manichaeian darkness of his captain.<sup>71</sup> Throughout the novel, he persistently attempts to placate Schultz and encourage a more cooperative relationship with the other gangs. These attempts culminate in his plea in the penultimate scene before

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<sup>70</sup> Anthony Hutchison, *Writing the Republic: Liberalism and Morality in American Political Fiction* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 174–75.

<sup>71</sup> Larzer Ziff, *Literary Democracy: The Declaration of Cultural Independence in America* (New York: Viking, 1981; repr. London: Penguin, 1982), p. 272.



the gang's murder, when he appeals to Schultz to placate the other crime gangs and abandon his plan to assassinate Dewey:

The modern businessman looks to combination for strength and for streamlining [...] And lo and behold the numbers rise. Nobody is fighting anybody.<sup>72</sup>

This appeal, which remains unheeded, echoes Starbuck's desperate plea on the last day of the Pequod's voyage:

Oh! Ahab, [...] not too late is it [...] to desist. See! Moby Dick seeks thee not. It is thou, thou, that madly seekest him!<sup>73</sup>

Yet while it is tempting to see Berman as the despairing voice of rationalism in the novel, we should bear in mind that such entreaties are more often than not spurred by self-interest. For another reading of Starbuck that applies equally to Berman is Gilmore's interpretation of him as 'the spokesman [...] for the commercial ethos of the age', for whom 'the physical universe exists to be turned into merchandise and exchanged for dollars'.<sup>74</sup> For the recurrent trope of Berman's character is his ability to see and manipulate the world in terms of numbers, and as Berman is head of Schultz's numbers racket, those numbers translate into dollars in the same way as Starbuck sees whales as commodities to be transformed into cash.

Billy effectively becomes Berman's apprentice as much as he is Schultz's, wondering 'which of them was more of a dangerous study to a simple boy just trying to get ahead and make something of himself'.<sup>75</sup> In the process of this

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<sup>72</sup> *BB*, p. 289.

<sup>73</sup> *Moby-Dick*, p. 619.

<sup>74</sup> Gilmore, p. 114.

<sup>75</sup> *BB*, p. 61.

apprenticeship, we encounter various quasi-poetic reflections on the nature of money and numbers that show how they invade all areas of existence. Schultz's mistress, Drew Preston, is, for example, equated with  $X$ , the unknown value in algebra, while the transformative nature of money is seen by Billy in a nightclub, where he observes the 'fluency of money [...] as it was spent and [...] turned into blue light and fancy clothes and indifferently delivered love songs' (p. 77). Money comes to seem so powerful that, when Schultz's attempted bribe of a councillor is turned down towards the end of the novel, Billy concludes that 'it truly was a momentous thing when the money wouldn't flow' (p. 279).

Although Billy continues to see the two men as polar opposites for much of the novel, his final realisation is that the two of them are helplessly intertwined. Their inextricability is such that when Billy returns to the scene of the gang's murder he kneels over the mortally wounded Schultz but hears Berman's voice:

[...] it seemed to me quite natural that their division would be expressed at this moment too, between the brain and the body, and that as long as Mr. Schultz was still alive, Mr. Berman would still be thinking for him and saying what Mr. Schultz wanted said. (p. 304)

This inextricability can be read as symbolic of the close ties between the Reagan administration and the markets: just as the stock market boom of the eighties would have been impossible without Reagan's laissez-faire economic policies and general deregulation, so it is unlikely that Reagan would have won such a crushing victory in the second presidential election without the apparent prosperity that the markets had helped deliver to ordinary Americans.

So although Tokarczyk and some early reviewers claimed the novel was a satire on Wall Street greed, I'd argue that Doctorow's use of *Moby-Dick* as an intertext transforms *Billy Bathgate* from a potential satire about the Reagan

administration disguised as a gangster novel into a submerged political novel whose concerns are the dangers to democracy that an attractive but demagogic leader represents, and the way in which capital has become entrenched in American society. Yet however much Billy may at times appear to long for an alternative to the world of heedless greed and rapacity that is presented here, his eventual prosperity via the discovery of Schultz's money suggests Doctorow's resigned acknowledgement that capital has become integral to the American myth of self-realisation. The inescapable lesson Billy learns is that money is not only 'deathless, [...] eternal', but 'the love of it [...] infinite' (p. 318). Capital is a dominant that has infiltrated everywhere, from the political sphere to the individual. As such, *Billy Bathgate* is a work that suggests that the contemporary political novel must not only engage with the potential threat to democracy in today's USA, but, necessarily, engage also with the role of capital within it.

### III

Despite *Billy Bathgate*'s submerged politics, Doctorow's return to using the materials of genre fiction proved both a critical and popular success. Its critical success is evidenced by its winning of the PEN/Faulkner award for fiction and finishing as runner-up in the 1990 Pulitzer Prize; indications of its popular success include being named in *Time*'s top ten novels of the decade, and a film adaptation scripted by Tom Stoppard that was released only two years after the novel.<sup>76</sup>

His next novel, *The Waterworks*, followed the same ventriloquial strategy of

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<sup>76</sup> The film bears little resemblance to Doctorow's original novel and proved a box office failure, recouping barely a tenth of its estimated budget despite a cast that included Dustin Hoffman and Nicole Kidman.

adapting genre fiction to more political ends. Set in post-bellum New York, *The Waterworks* bears several resemblances to the prototypical detective fiction of Poe. These include its plot structure of beginning with a mystery and moving towards a solution, its gothic setting in the fog-filled streets of Manhattan, and its narration by someone other than the actual detective.<sup>77</sup> However, Doctorow's novel also bears resemblances to later works, such as those of Raymond Chandler, in the way that the novel's original mystery – the disappearance of Martin Pemberton, a freelance journalist – is superseded by a larger one that reveals a deeper level of corruption in society.<sup>78</sup>

Within this detective narrative there is a return to the submerged politics of *Billy Bathgate*. For although *The Waterworks* was published in 1994, in the first term of the Clinton presidency, it nevertheless shares *Billy Bathgate*'s interest in, and critique of, the newly emergent laissez-faire version of capitalism expounded first by Reagan and then by his successor, George Bush Sr. As I will illustrate below, in reaching back to the beginning of the Gilded Age of American capital, Doctorow's first post-Cold War novel once again questions the direction in which the American democratic project is moving under its dominant ideology of capital, a question that had become all the more urgent now that the perceived enemy of communism had been defeated. However, in contrast to *Billy Bathgate*, *The Waterworks* also constitutes a return to the question of the artist's role within American society that had troubled Doctorow in *Lives of the Poets* and *World's Fair*, and thereby suggests a certain lack of faith in the efficacy of submerged political novels.

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<sup>77</sup> McIlvaine embodies the classic trope of a narrator who 'has an excuse for being close to the detective but cannot follow or understand his line of investigation' (Cawelti, p. 85).

<sup>78</sup> This pattern is exemplified by Chandler's *The Big Sleep*, where Marlowe's original task to deal with a blackmailer leads to revelations of pornography and murder.

If we examine the contemporary reviews of the novel, there is little evidence that readers perceived *The Waterworks*' submerged politics. The majority of reviews praised it for a gripping story and for the way in which Doctorow ventriloquized the voices of nineteenth century literary forebears, particularly Poe. Only a few critics viewed the novel as anything more than a well-executed work of genre fiction, and their reactions were mixed. Gerald Weissmann labelled it 'an awful pastiche of Poe' 'thickened [...] by an avalanche of parentheses', and claimed that its politics are that 'industry and science are wasted, commerce and government corrupt; the poor and savage noble'.<sup>79</sup> A more positive review came from Ted Solotaroff, who discerned that Melville was a 'figure who haunts the book's pages, [...] his moral imagination gripped between the evils of rampant industrialism and even more rampant corruption'. This, Solotaroff argued, cast 'a great shadow' on Doctorow, 'urging him to see darkly and negatively all the way to the end of sanity and morality, and to make a distinctively American allegory of it'.<sup>80</sup>

Like *Billy Bathgate*, *The Waterworks* is absent from most Doctorow monographs, but there has been little academic interest even in the form of essays. Diemert's reading of the novel as, in part, a meditation on faith in the age of science is a far more measured reading than Bergström's semi-mystical reading of the novel as an exploration of 'the desire human beings have to re-establish through the mysterious signs and symbols of language a lost connection with other beings'.<sup>81</sup> Wutz refers to its treatment of post-bellum New York as 'an allegorized foil for the dot-com stock-market bubble of the nineties', but this reading is troubled by chronology, with the dot-com bubble effectively coming long after the

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<sup>79</sup> Gerald Weissmann, 'Haunted by Science', *New Criterion Review*, Nov. 1994 <<http://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Haunted-by-science-5047>> [accessed 15 November 2010] (paras. 2, 4 & 16 of 16).

<sup>80</sup> Ted Solotaroff, 'Of Melville, Poe and Doctorow', in Siegel, pp. 137–43 (p. 137) (first publ. in *The Nation*, June 6, 1994).

<sup>81</sup> Bergström, p. 141.

novel's publication.<sup>82</sup>

Tokarczyk's claim that the novel's central metaphor 'is a collusion among science, government, and wealth', with New York City and the Gilded Age representing 'intensified, exaggerated versions of the United States' does point towards a possible political interpretation of the novel.<sup>83</sup> However, her eventual conclusion that 'if the world is beyond repair, the community is not, and individual local actions are effective, if limited, against' this collusion feels an excessively positive reading that is not fully supported by the novel itself.<sup>84</sup>

None of these readings really elucidate the novel's submerged politics, or explain why Doctorow claimed in 1996 that *The Waterworks* may be 'the most profoundly political thing' he has written.<sup>85</sup> However, the overlap between the novel and Doctorow's concerns over the political and economic climate of the late 1980s and early 1990s is clear from both Doctorow's archives and the essays he was writing around that time.<sup>86</sup>

As noted in the previous chapter, *The Waterworks* as we know it today emerged from an earlier version entitled *The Soul*, of which Doctorow completed two full drafts before adapting its plot and structure to that of the published work. Doctorow's practice of not dating drafts means there is usually little means of knowing exactly when works were composed, but there is a clear indication that the reorientation of *The Soul* into *The Waterworks* occurred in 1991, and coincided

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<sup>82</sup> Wutz, p. 516.

<sup>83</sup> Tokarczyk, p. 151.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid, p. 166. Tokarczyk's reading aspires to find an ending typical of crime fiction that, as Franco Moretti argues, absolves the reader by positing society's unity and innocence (*Signs Taken for Wonders*, pp 144–45).

<sup>85</sup> Richard Marranca, 'Finding a Historical Line', in *Conversations*, pp. 207–14 (p. 211) (first publ. in *The Literary Review* 39 (1996), 407–14).

<sup>86</sup> Andrew Delbanco recognises a link between *The Waterworks* and the essays in *Jack London, Hemingway and the Constitution*, but in his eagerness to dismiss the latter as 'cant' fails to explore the political significance. See 'Necropolis News', in Seigel, pp. 229–34 (first publ. in *The New Republic*, July 18, 1994, 44–48).

with the drafting of his essay ‘The Character of Presidents’, inspired by the 1991 presidential elections. In effect, the urge to engage with political questions appears to have come to predominate, and, in fact, to shift the book’s main focus away from its original theological preoccupation.

The evidence for this is a typewritten sheet dated 6/5/91, which bears both part of a draft of the essay and of *The Waterworks*, now narrated solely by McIlvaine. The draft of the essay declares that:

This President is a terrible liar. He lied about his opponents in the primaries, he lied about his opponent in the election. He lies about his involvement in shadowy para government operations of the past, and he lies about why he is doing what he is doing in the present.<sup>87</sup>

This is almost identical to the eventual published version:

Mr. Bush is a man who lies. [...] Vice President Bush lied about his opponents in the primaries, and he lied about Mr. Dukakis in the election. President Bush lies today about the bills he vetoes, as he lies about his involvement in the arms-for-hostages trade with Iran [...] He lies about what he did in the past and about why he is doing what he is doing in the present.<sup>88</sup>

Where the two versions of this critique of George Bush Sr differ is in the draft’s analysis that: ‘No one can out shout him because no one has as many microphones, TV screens, headlines at his disposal as a president.’ This dilemma of political domination of the press directly mirrors Boss Tweed’s corruption of the press in *The Waterworks*, just as McIlvaine, a newspaper editor, represents the kind of ‘brave journalist’ Doctorow hopes ‘may expose [President Bush’s] lies a year from now’.<sup>89</sup> Thus it would seem clear that part of the decision to switch to McIlvaine as a single narrator was linked to the desire to once more engage with

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<sup>87</sup> ELDP, 2A, 39.004 *The Waterworks* (notebook, notes, mss pages, mostly from *The Waterworks*) – Part 1, unnumbered loose page.

<sup>88</sup> *JLHC*, pp. 98–99.

<sup>89</sup> ELDP, 2A, 39.004.

the practices of the Reagan-Bush administration through another submerged political novel that would attack ‘the oligarchical presumption that no one but an executive citizenry of CEOs, money managers, and the rich and well-born really matters’.<sup>90</sup>

However, if *Billy Bathgate* used *Moby-Dick* as a model for a submerged political novel, *The Waterworks* feels closer to the Melville of ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener’. This is not only due to a similarity in the geography of the two works, which includes a visit by McIlvaine to the Tombs prison, or in the two narrators’ shared fascination with a lowly employee, but also in the overwhelming sense of how the dominant form of capitalism co-opts the existence of its workers. When, for example, Doctorow has McIlvaine declare ‘O my Manhattan!’, this direct echo of the final words of ‘Bartleby’ (‘Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!’), coming so early in the novel, serves as a veiled invitation to the reader to view the novel’s characters as being as helplessly enmeshed in the hegemony of the Gilded Age as those in ‘Bartleby’ are of antebellum New York.<sup>91</sup> In doing so, it raises the same question of how resistance to the dominant might be achieved as Melville’s work engaged with over a century before. Yet, through clear parallels with the dominant economics of the eighties and early nineties, *The Waterworks* also invites the reader to reflect on possible avenues of resistance in their own time.

That Doctorow intends the reader to view the novel both as something more than a simple work of formula fiction and as a mirroring allegory of the present is apparent from the outset. McIlvaine’s introduction of Martin Pemberton in the first paragraph as someone whose words people ‘wouldn’t take [...] as literal truth’,

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<sup>90</sup> *JLHC*, p. 96.

<sup>91</sup> *W*, p. 6; and Herman Melville, ‘Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street’ (New York: Putnam’s, 1853), repr. in *Billy Budd, Sailor and Selected Tales*, ed. by Robert Milder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 41. In the troubled relationship between Martin Pemberton and Emily Tisdale there is also a Melvillean echo of the relationship between Pierre Glendinning and Lucy Tartan in *Pierre*.



though he was ‘a critic of his life and times’,<sup>92</sup> suggests a disjunction between representation and reality, but paradoxically implies that accurate social criticism may come from this failure to tell the literal truth. This veiled invitation to see another truth within what follows is further reinforced by the ending of the first chapter when McIlvaine admits that he ‘interpreted what [Martin] had said as a metaphor, a poetic way of characterizing the wretched city that neither of us loved, but neither of us could leave’ (p. 8).

This signposting of a secondary meaning relevant to the present is found only briefly in *Billy Bathgate*, but it becomes a recurrent narrative strategy in *The Waterworks*, as though Doctorow is concerned that the politics in the novel may remain too deeply submerged. This is partly achieved by both oblique and direct reference to the reader’s present. For example, McIlvaine confesses to not being ‘exactly complacent about our modern industrial civilization’ (p. 4), and this adjective *modern*, which sits uneasily between McIlvaine’s past and our contemporary moment, is then repeated a further ten times in the novel. A similar effect is achieved both by McIlvaine’s tendency to speculate in the present tense, thus highlighting the link between the depicted past and the present moment of reading, and through the use of other temporally ambiguous terms such as ‘now’ in: ‘It was a hard world, but are we less hard now?’ (p. 66) and ‘our’, particularly in the final chapter’s opening line: ‘Finally, after all, I have been talking about our city.’ (p. 246).

Yet perhaps nowhere in the whole of Doctorow’s oeuvre is the correlation between the past and the present made more explicit than when McIlvaine describes his city as standing ‘to your New York City today as some panoramic negative print, inverted in its lights and shadows ... its seasons turned around ... a

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<sup>92</sup> *W*, p. 3.

companion city of the other side'.<sup>93</sup> This passage, like several others in the novel, bears an almost word-for-word resemblance to Doctorow's 1992 essay 'The Nineteenth New York', in which he is explicit about the relations between the past and the present, declaring that 'the century is still with us, the ghostly nineteenth [...] a companion city of the other side, some moral hologram generated from an unknown but intense radiation of historical energy and randomly come to imprint on our dreaming brains'.<sup>94</sup> Published in the same year as 'The Character of Presidents', and also appearing in draft form in the archival workings for *The Waterworks*, the essay appears in retrospect to be a declaration of allegorical intent for the novel that he would publish two years later.

In addition to such overt invitations to read the novel in relation to the present day, the numerous allusions to the financial practices of the Gilded Age also encourage a reading of the novel as a metaphor of the economic experience of New York in the eighties and early nineties. It would, of course, be difficult to write a novel set in the Gilded Age without referring to the economic climate of the time, when capitalism was so dominant that Charles King, president of Columbia University, could state in 1858 that 'This city is the creation of Commerce'.<sup>95</sup> However, references throughout *The Waterworks* to 'Wall Street thieves' (p. 4), 'the inane social doings of the class of new wealth' (p. 21), the destruction of homes for commercial buildings (p. 33), 'the defiance that you get from much money when it combines with little taste' (p. 81), and the volatility of the markets (p. 172) appear pointedly designed to conflate in the reader's mind the Gilded Age and the 'casino economy' of the Yuppie era, 'with its accoutrements of

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<sup>93</sup> *W*, p. 59. The ellipses in quotes from *The Waterworks* are Doctorow's own unless enclosed by square brackets.

<sup>94</sup> 'The Nineteenth New York' in *JLHC*, pp 139–47 (p. 145).

<sup>95</sup> Quoted in Sven Beckert, *The Monied Metropolis: New York City and the Consolidation of the American Bourgeoisie, 1850–1896* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 69.

gentrification, close attention to symbolic capital, fashion, design, and quality of urban life'.<sup>96</sup>

However, the critiquing of the capitalist dominant in *The Waterworks* would be less effective without what probably constitutes Doctorow's most inventive adaptation of a genre fiction formula. For if *The Waterworks* is a detective novel replete with missing persons and, in Donne, a masterful detective who combines Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, its plot derives ultimately from a fictional element more closely associated with the gothic or horror, namely the undead. This element manifests itself in Martin's father, Augustus Pemberton, who – with other aged financiers – is kept alive by Doctor Sartorius via rudimentary blood transfusions from young orphans. One reading of this gothic element is that it is merely a playfully inventive ploy on Doctorow's part, subverting the customary practice of having a detective investigate a death by instead having a detective investigating why some characters remain alive, albeit in an almost catatonic state. Yet both the novel and other material suggest that Doctorow had a far more serious design for these super-rich undead than a simple desire to subvert the generic formula.

That these financiers are supposed to represent the elite of Doctorow's own time is hinted at in the introduction to *Jack London*, composed in 1993, a year before *The Waterworks* was published. Doctorow discusses the state of the nation in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War, and notes that

In this final decade or so, with the mandate of a populace compliant with ruling circumstances, the last administrations of the cold war conflated its ideology with the capitalist principles of the nineteenth century. Deregulating industry, dismantling social legislation of benefit to anyone but their core constituencies, abjuring law enforcement where the law was not to their liking, and politicizing the courts, they distributed the enormous costs of the cold war democratically among all the classes of society except the wealthiest. The effect on our national standard of living was as a vampire's

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<sup>96</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 332.

arterial suck.<sup>97</sup>

In the novel, this ‘vampire’s arterial suck’, symbolized by the blood transfusions, is for the immortal benefit not only of the financiers, but also Boss Tweed, thereby implicating both big business and government in this illegal practice, and in the citywide corruption Doctorow details, whose ‘effect on the city had been like a vampire’s arterial suck’.<sup>98</sup> This collusion between business and government is further supported by archive material, in which one note shows Doctorow’s aim to make it clear:

that whole society implicated in Rufus’ continuance of the animation of the capitalist dead, a selective conspiracy of wealth and science.<sup>99</sup>

The ‘animation of the capitalist dead’ may at first seem an overly dramatic flight of fancy, but if we follow McIlvaine’s early hint of seeing societal critique hidden behind the literal truth of words, then the underlying purpose of Doctorow’s invention becomes clear. For when the financiers who bankroll Sartorius’ experiments form a group in search of immortality, they mimic the actions of the corporations that came into being in the Gilded Age and changed the American capitalist landscape forever, and still dominate it today. As Alan Trachtenberg argues:

The corporation embodied a legally sanctioned fiction, that an association of people constituted a single entity which might hold property, sue and be sued, enter contracts, and continue in existence beyond the lifetime or membership of any of its participants.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> *JLHC*, p. xii.

<sup>98</sup> *W*, p. 151.

<sup>99</sup> ELDP, 2A, 38.017 *The Waterworks* (drafts, corrections and notes) – Part 1, p. 2 of notes. Rufus is the name for Sartorius in early drafts.

<sup>100</sup> Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. 83.

This yearning by the rich to effectively escape death and make the fruits of capital eternal, albeit for a select few, is gradually revealed as the central motivation for the crime in *The Waterworks*. When McIlvaine interviews Sarah Pemberton about her ‘monstrous thieving husband’, she recalls how Augustus called his doctor ‘a fool and assured him he had no intention of dying at any foreseeable time in the future’.<sup>101</sup> Augustus’ belief in his possible immortality is based on a process at the root of which lies capital. This is signalled by the repetition of the verb ‘buy’ when Doctorow reveals the disappearance of the children whose blood makes the animation possible:

“[...] I aver an’ detest there is a man going about these nights offerin’ to buy up loose children.”  
“Buy them?”  
“Exactly so.” (pp. 91–92)

That these capitalists believe money makes anything possible, including immortality, is further emphasised when Martin Pemberton’s long speech detailing his father’s plot ends with their hope that Sartorius would recompose ‘their lives piece by piece [...] reconstituting them metempsychotically as endless beings’ (p. 200).

Though this deregulated corporation of financiers may not have a strict allegorical correlation to any particular present day corporation, their business practices are clearly designed to recall the corporations of the final years of the Cold War, ranging from their collusion with government to their hiding place at the waterworks, the steel and glass construction of which prefigures the ‘legion of steel and glass corporate headquarters’ that Marshall Berman argues sprang up in the

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<sup>101</sup> *W*, pp. 76–78.

USA in the twentieth century in imitation of the Crystal Palace.<sup>102</sup> These misguided financiers represent ‘the persistence of evil’,<sup>103</sup> practising irresponsible forms of capitalism that put profits above all else and ignoring ‘the plague of homelessness, disempowerment, and impoverishment’ that was its obverse both in the Gilded Age and in the Yuppie era.<sup>104</sup>

Nevertheless, this does not mean that *The Waterworks* is an outright attack on capitalism per sé, as Doctorow’s more right-wing detractors might argue. For although *The Waterworks* is a politically submerged novel, it does not constitute a complete rejection of capitalism, but rather, like *Billy Bathgate* before it, a warning of its dangers. In returning to the Gilded Age, Doctorow highlights the moment in which corporate interests began to ‘preempt the idea of the larger community, the national ideal, the United States as the ultimate communal reality’,<sup>105</sup> and thereby provides a riposte to the triumphalist narrative of capitalism that followed in the wake of the end of the Cold War. If America has triumphed, he seems to be asking, what has been the price of that victory?

Doctorow’s answer to that question may lie in his decision to begin *The Waterworks* and end ‘The Nineteenth New York’ with Abraham Lincoln’s funeral, an event which, as Doctorow makes clear in the essay, formed ‘a commencement procession for our century’.<sup>106</sup> If, as Wyn Kelley argues, nineteenth century New York represented a labyrinthine city in which rising rents and increasing social stratification challenged ‘the ideology of liberty and justice for all’ central to ‘American democratic individualism’,<sup>107</sup> for Doctorow it seems that Lincoln’s

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<sup>102</sup> Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity*, 2nd. ed. (London: Verso, 2010)

<sup>103</sup> *W*, p. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Harvey, p. 332.

<sup>105</sup> *RU*, p. 104.

<sup>106</sup> *JLHC*, p. 145.

<sup>107</sup> Kelley, p. 96.

death represents the moment that such ideology passed away and was instead replaced by a new dominant, the ‘soulless, social resolve’ that favoured business above all else.<sup>108</sup> By representing that moment, Doctorow effectively returns to the pre-history of our era, the beginnings of a system that would reach its apotheosis in the last years of the Cold War, in which ‘the Right’s chastisement of the ungrateful known as Morning in America’ was the final manifestation of ‘a social and cultural pathology’ that ‘constituted an act of national self-mutilation all the more astonishing for the greatness of the country that performed it’.<sup>109</sup> Thus, the black dye that stains the buildings for weeks after Lincoln’s funeral is a symbol of grief for a political idealism that will never be recovered, a lament for what is already lost.<sup>110</sup>

This is the main reason why I disagree with Tokarczyk’s reading of *The Waterworks* as an endorsement of the possibility of small-scale community action against corrupt officials. For although in the interests of plot, McIlvaine, Donne et al triumph over the financiers and love manifests itself in the twin marriages that end the book, it seems to me that the ‘heroic’ characters in *The Waterworks* are, in their clinging to an ideology of justice and truth, little more than representatives of what, to borrow Raymond Williams’ term, we could call the residual of the ideals of American democracy.

Doctorow’s novel represents a metaphorical attack on the apparent lawlessness and self-interest of sections of corporate America at the end of the twentieth century, and on the government’s role in assisting them, but this is now

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<sup>108</sup> *JLHC*, p. 147.

<sup>109</sup> *JLHC*, p. xii. This introduction, written in March 1993, is the final piece Doctorow published before *The Waterworks* and offers further evidence that the end of the Cold War was paramount in his thinking while composing the novel.

<sup>110</sup> See *W*, p. 6 and *JLHC*, p. 147. The other figure apart from Melville that haunts this evocation of Lincoln’s funeral is, of course, Walt Whitman, particularly the Whitman of ‘Crossing Brooklyn Ferry’ and ‘O Captain! My Captain!’.

the status quo, the dominant that has ensconced itself in America as the norm. The novel may manifest Doctorow's moral outrage at the state of America, but its nostalgic recall of a more democratically idealist spirit is unlikely to disturb the hegemony of the financial and political elite. Its anger is tinged with resignation, its weight of despair negated by the commercial need to produce a happy ending. In conclusion to this chapter, I wish to argue that part of the reason for this reading of the novel's overall despair lies in the narrative's recognition of the difficulty of political critique.

For a submerged political novel to be effective, it needs to be both read and interpreted. We need only consider the fate of *Moby-Dick* in Melville's time to see how a lack of readers can effectively suppress even the most skilful of submerged political writing, while in its sanitised version of the past, the film adaptation of *Billy Bathgate* offers an example of a 'reading' of Doctorow that ignores the novel's submerged politics. As I have argued above, through such passages as the invitation to see New York as a 'negative print' of the present day, Doctorow encourages the reader to enact a reading of *The Waterworks* that transcends the literal and grasps its submerged politics, but such passages are prompted by what we might term an anxiety of interpretation that is perhaps unavoidable for the writer of any submerged political novel. In effect, without resorting to didacticism, it is impossible for the novelist to ensure that the novel's submerged critique will not be lost in the reader's engagement with the plot.

Yet in *The Waterworks* this anxiety of interpretation appears to form part of Doctorow's continued investigation into the position of the socially responsible artist in society. As I argued in the first section of this chapter, Doctorow had considered the position of the socially responsible artist in *Lives of the Poets* and



*World's Fair* before re-embracing in *Billy Bathgate* the strategy of genre fiction as submerged political novel he had first used in *Welcome to Hard Times*. However, where *Billy Bathgate* shows little trace of the artistic concerns that inform the two *Künstlerromane*, *The Waterworks* returns to them through the novel's several creator figures: McIlvaine, Martin Pemberton, and Harry Wheelwright, a painter who is also Pemberton's friend. In doing so, Doctorow underlines the compromises the artist must face in his/her attempt to speak out against the dominant culture.

McIlvaine first visits Wheelwright with Donne, the police chief, when they begin to investigate Martin's disappearance. Here he finds his initial impression of Wheelwright as a society painter who lives by flattering the rich challenged by what he sees in his studio. Donne and McIlvaine disturb the painting of a live model, but rather than a society heiress it is a Civil War veteran who 'had one arm cut off above the elbow, the reddened skin of the stump sewn together like the end of a sausage'.<sup>111</sup> The studio's walls, in an echo of Baby's collage in *The Book of Daniel*, display a mix of other 'maimed and disfigured veterans painted in unflinching detail [and] the more academic portraits or fashionable New York scenes designed for the market'. In this melange, McIlvaine recognises a 'conflicted mind [...] the critique, and the necessity of earning a living, side by side' (p. 97). What starts as the description of an artist's studio therefore becomes a summary of the conflict that faces any socially responsible artist in a capitalist society, between the demands of the market and the need to be true to one's own vision.

This episode in Wheelwright's study serves as a prelude to McIlvaine's own experience of a similar conflict. For McIlvaine's narration of *The Waterworks*, his moment of becoming a writer, happens long after the events, mostly because he has

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<sup>111</sup> W, p. 96.

been silenced by political interests. He remembers that, accompanying Donne to interview Wheelwright, ‘ I felt as if I was giving up ... my diction ... for his’ (p. 95). On this occasion, McIlvaine’s surrendering of his voice to the interests of the state is in the public interest: he keeps the secret Wheelwright reveals in order to help Donne solve the case. Yet shortly after, he finds himself silenced for more insidious reasons when presented with details of the full scale of Boss Tweed’s corruption. McIlvaine senses that ‘this story was so monumental ... the truth so overwhelming in its demands’ that it must be published; instead, the fact that ‘Tweed committed advertising to our pages—unnecessary, and very profitable, city advertising’ (p. 150) ensures his publisher refuses to run the story and the corruption remains hidden from the public.

This second silencing of the artist figure, along with the compromised position of Wheelwright, is, I would argue, symbolic of Doctorow’s own frustrations as a writer. If *The Waterworks* represents a return to the concerns of the *Künstlerromanne*, then the message learnt here is that, as Berman argues in his analysis of Marx:

Modern culture [is] part of modern industry. Art, physical science, social theory like Marx’s own, all are modes of production; the bourgeoisie controls the means of production in culture, as in everything else, and anyone who wants to create must work in the orbit of its power.<sup>112</sup>

McIlvaine’s vain attempt to speak out against the Tweed Ring therefore constitutes a metaphor of the situation in which the artist finds himself in contemporary America, where

anyone who speaks of the [...] failure and mendacity and carelessness of

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<sup>112</sup> Berman, p. 117.

human life in so much of our public policy in tones any louder than muted regret will be marginalized for this indecorous transgression as a leftist, or perhaps a raging populist, but in any event someone so out of the “mainstream” as not to be taken seriously.<sup>113</sup>

This silencing of dissenting voices is aided by the conglomeration of ‘all forms of communication, books and magazines and newspapers and radio stations and cable TV channels, movies, and music, into one smooth reality-laundering revenue stream that is in fact a ready-made highly suggestive simulacrum of state-controlled media’.<sup>114</sup> So however much the artist wishes to criticise or act for social justice, he can only do so within the ‘orbit’ of the bourgeoisie’s power; he is allowed only to raise his voice to the volume they are prepared to tolerate. If the conglomerated publishers etc. represent a ‘simulacrum of state-controlled media’, it is impossible to criticise the state fully and openly through its own mouthpiece without being marginalised. Though he may be capable of producing submerged political novels, the artist as capitalist worker must ensure that the politics remain submerged or risk losing his livelihood.

Such a reading is further supported by Doctorow’s recycling of the short story ‘The Water Works’ towards the end of the novel.<sup>115</sup> Originally appearing as the second story in *Lives of the Poets*, the story’s unnamed narrator recounts a visit to the New York reservoir in which he tracks an anonymous figure into the machinery of the water works, watches him load the corpse of a drowned urchin into his carriage, and then returns to see the workers ‘dividing some treasure among themselves’ and drinking whisky, before noting at the story’s end that

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<sup>113</sup> *RU*, p. 105. Coming in a 2001 lecture, this passage suggests that Doctorow saw little amelioration in the artist’s plight during the Clinton years, perhaps as a result of the entrenchment of the right-wing media during the Reagan and Bush presidencies that had been aided by the laissez-faire economic policies of that era.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p. 105.

<sup>115</sup> *LP*, pp. 21–24.

‘There is such a cherishing of ritual too among firemen and gravediggers’.<sup>116</sup> At only four pages in length, it is perhaps the collection’s most enigmatic story and, placed as the second story, effectively represents the first mature work after Jonathan’s initial story of his grasping of the power of the writer’s independence. Yet archival evidence shows that Doctorow originally planned this story to either open or end the collection, thus suggesting that it plays a significant role in this *Künstlerroman* despite Doctorow’s eventual decision to begin with ‘The Writer in the Family’.<sup>117</sup>

I would argue that the significance of the story’s role only really becomes clear in *The Waterworks*, when the majority of it is recycled as McIlvaine’s dream of Sartorius, but with two subtle additions.<sup>118</sup> In both versions of the episode, the narrator feels that the Sartorius figure ‘acts on the presumption of partnership, as if he were on watch for our mutual benefit’ (p. 217), but only in the later version does the Sartorius figure look back at the narrator after collecting the dead body:

He glances back at me over his shoulder as the carriage races off, the bright black wheel’s spokes brought to a blur. He smiles at me as at a complicitor. (p. 219)

After narrating this look, which draws him into complicity in the act, McIlvaine states: ‘Finally you suffer the story you tell. After all these years in my head, my story occupies me, it has grown into the physical dimensions of my brain’ (p. 219). Here we see that the very act of witnessing makes the artist figure complicit in the regime he wishes to critique objectively, a point which is underlined by the final

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<sup>116</sup> *LP*, p. 24.

<sup>117</sup> ELDP, 2B, 43.005, *Lives of the Poets* – unidentified draft with corrections – Part 1. A handwritten contents note has the collection running in historically chronological order, from the Gilded Age tale ‘The Water Works’ to the contemporary novella ‘Lives of the Poets’. Numbers on the typed pages of the stories indicate an alternative running order that begins with ‘Lives of the Poets’ (numbered 1–94) and ends with ‘The Water Works’ (numbered 179–84).

<sup>118</sup> *W*, pp. 217–20.

change Doctorow makes to this scene.

In both versions of the episode, the water workers who have retrieved the dead child from the water divide ‘some treasure among themselves’ after the exit of the Sartorius figure.<sup>119</sup> What these spoils are is never revealed, but it is presumably money that Sartorius has paid them for their troubles. But whereas in the first version the narrator ends the story by noting their love of ritual, here, in McIlvaine’s dream, rather than ignoring him, the water workers ‘call out to me to come join them. I do...’.<sup>120</sup> This dream enactment of Althusser’s interpellation, the notion that we are all helplessly enmeshed in society the moment we respond to its call, suggests a resignation on Doctorow’s part to the failure of the submerged political novel. For however critical the socially responsible author may be of the state, he can be so only through a state-controlled media, and thereby in some ways supports the regime through a process of normalisation even as he seeks to subvert it. The submerged political novel can smuggle political fiction into the genre-dominated mainstream, but it forever runs the risk of making the critique it contains appear safe, its subversive intent one more thing to consume uncritically and unthinkingly.

Thus at the close of *The Waterworks* we see Doctorow through McIlvaine re-acknowledge the conflicted position of the artist in contemporary America. As political fiction is as much a commodity as any other kind of literature, its author as much of a bourgeois producer as the writer of non-political novels, it seems impossible for the writer to be entirely innocent and not involved in the very processes he seeks to criticise. It is surely no coincidence that in this book whose narrator is ‘sensitive to architecture’,<sup>121</sup> the dream of complicity takes place at the

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<sup>119</sup> *LP*, p. 24; *W*, p. 219.

<sup>120</sup> *W*, p. 219

<sup>121</sup> *W*, p. 57.

reservoir that once stood ‘where the New York Public Library stands today’.<sup>122</sup> For if the Gilded Age established that the ‘power to say what was real, what was America, seemed now safely in the hands of property, wealth, and the word “Culture”’,<sup>123</sup> Doctorow’s novel suggests that this remains the case in contemporary America.

Culture, symbolised by the library, and capital, symbolised by the reservoir beneath whose walls the undead financiers appear to Martin Pemberton, are inextricably linked, the one built on the other. It is the socially conscious writer’s task to negotiate between the two poles in his attempt to reveal the truth, yet he can never fully escape the web of complicity the ties between the two create. Even as he attempts to subvert the expectations of the state-controlled media, whether through encyclopaedic or submerged political fiction disguised as genre, he remains part of that system.

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<sup>122</sup> *JLHC*, p. 142.

<sup>123</sup> Trachtenberg, p. 232.

## Conclusion: Writing in a Country of Language

Although the format of this thesis has limited my study of Doctorow to two chapters, through my analysis of his use of encyclopaedic narratives and of the submerged politics within his later genre fiction I hope to have illustrated how we can understand Doctorow as a writer who demands a more complicated reading than either Jameson's labelling of him as 'the epic poet of the disappearance of the American radical past' or right-wing critics' dismissal of him as a Leftist ideologue have so far permitted.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout his work, Doctorow both celebrates and investigates the power of fiction to provide an alternative picture of the world to that provided by the dominant culture by giving 'the reader something more than information'.<sup>2</sup> In this view, fiction offers 'a language of freedom' that offers release from the dominant culture's monologic version of reality and creates instead a more democratic arena where differing interpretations of the world are given equal value. His encyclopaedic fictions liberate the reader by drawing them into an act of interpretation that reveals the presumption of any claim to a totalized knowledge, while his submerged political novels suggest a way that the writer may still attempt to critique the dominant culture even as it tightens its grip on all aspects of culture, including literature. His fiction is undoubtedly 'about the way power works in our society',<sup>3</sup> but if this revelation of the structures of power identifies him as a writer of the Left then that is perhaps more to do with the Right's aversion to any criticism of the current dominant culture of capitalism than with any programmatic

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<sup>1</sup> Jameson, p. 24.

<sup>2</sup> *JLHC*, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup> *JLHC*, p. 116.

affiliation on Doctorow's part.

For if Doctorow bears any affiliation, it appears to be towards the original ideals of America's founding fathers, and to the democratic idealism of Melville, Hawthorne and Thoreau. In his 1987 essay, 'A Citizen Reads the Constitution', he says that, through the Constitution, the founding fathers 'invented a country of language, and that language celebrated—whether in resolutions of moral triumph or moral failure—the idea of law'.<sup>4</sup> The writers of the American Renaissance, but particularly Melville in *Moby-Dick*, engaged through literature with 'the dark truths' of the Republic as it grew to maturity, and I would argue that Doctorow sees his own work as continuing their legacy both stylistically and politically. If this task was something he felt in the sixties and seventies, it appeared to become particularly urgent towards the end of the Cold War when America lived 'in an age in which the meanings of words [were] dissolving' (p. 134) and the Reagan administration discoursed 'not in reason and argument but in demagogic pieties', with 'a lack of reverence for law and contempt for language' that seemed 'to go hand in hand' (p. 136).

How far any writer can influence politics is, of course, open to question. He or she may have 'the language of freedom' at their disposal, but in the post-Cold War era the dominant culture has, if anything, grown even more adept at silencing dissent. This is suggested not just through the tendency of government policies, both in the USA and elsewhere, to champion the science/technology regime of facts over the Arts, but also through the economic climate that has seen publishing houses merged into super conglomerates whose apparent interest in making profit rather than in promoting literature threatens to create a homogenous literature in which dissenting voices are stifled. This problem may be acute for unpublished or

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<sup>4</sup> 'A Citizen Reads the Constitution', in *JLHC*, pp. 117–38 (p. 126).



less well-known novelists, but it also affects the reception of more established authors like Doctorow, with critics demanding, as we have seen, that he writes ‘another book [of] the kind [...] he usually writes, the kind he's best at’.<sup>5</sup>

Yet that America continues to be a country of language is suggested by the way in which Barack Obama was sworn in as president for a second time in two days because ‘one word was given out of order’ in the original ceremony and the Democrats feared this linguistic slip would leave his presidency open to legal challenge.<sup>6</sup> As long as language continues to have this power, then there remains hope that the writer retains the possibility to both critique and influence the dominant regime, and currently Doctorow perhaps offers this hope more than most other writers. For it is both a point of irony and of optimism that when asked to name his favourite authors, the writer President Obama chose after Shakespeare was Doctorow.<sup>7</sup> Whether Doctorow’s fiction, with its appeal to social justice, will have any bearing on Obama’s policies as president remains to be seen, but it is interesting that the world’s most powerful leader admires a writer who has not only strongly criticised previous presidents, but who sees fiction’s role as countering the monologic ‘regime language’ with ‘a language of freedom whose power consists in what we threaten to become’.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Keeling.

<sup>6</sup> See ‘Obama Is Sworn in for Second Time’ <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/obama\\_inauguration/7843881.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/obama_inauguration/7843881.stm)>.

<sup>7</sup> See Sarah Crown, ‘E. L. Doctorow: I Don’t Have a Style but the Books Do’, *Guardian*, 23 January 2010, Review section, pp. 2–4 (p. 2).

<sup>8</sup> *JLHC*, p. 153.

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